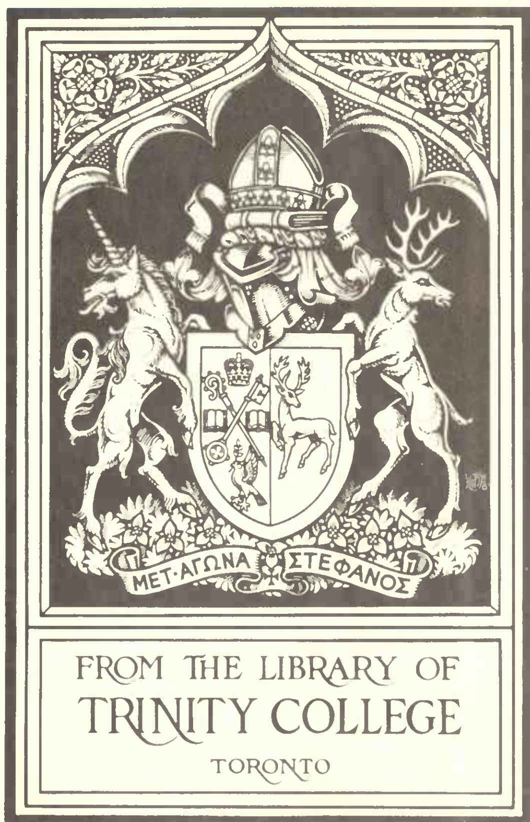



MET·ΑΓΩΝΑ ΣΤΕΦΑΝΟΣ
FROM THE LIBRARY OF
TRINITY COLLEGE
TORONTO

HINDU FASTS AND FEASTS

BY

ABHAY CHARAN MUKERJI, M.A.,

PROFESSOR, MUIR CENTRAL COLLEGE,

ALLAHABAD.

Old sisters of a day gone by,
Gray nurses, loving nothing new;
Why should they miss their yearly due
Before their time? They too will die.'

—*Tennyson.*

[*SECOND EDITION.*]

ALLAHABAD

THE INDIAN PRESS

1918

[*Price Re.* 1. 1/4

Printed and published by Apurva Krishna Bose, at the Indian Press,
Allahabad.

PREFACE

In introducing my little book to the public, I feel that my first word should be a word of sincere gratitude to the Hon'ble Mr. J. G. Jennings, M.A., Director of Public Instruction, Bihar and Orissa, to whom I owe not only the idea of writing on such a subject, but also his kind collaboration in the actual production of no fewer than seven of these essays. The kindness with which he gave me his valued assistance and encouragement in the midst of his heavy official duties as Principal, Muir Central College, is certainly worthy of a higher acknowledgment than the mere formality of a word of thanks in the Preface.

In their first form, these essays appeared as articles in The *Leader* or The *Pioneer*, from time to time, during the years 1913 and 1914. I have now re-written them, with large additions, and arranged them in chronological order, with a view to giving them, if possible, a more permanent form. Two of them—Sitala Saptami and Dasahra or Ganga Puja—are appearing here for the first time.

No one can be more sensible of the shortcomings of this little book than myself. My difficulties were serious, and in many cases almost insurmountable. In the first place, it is impossible to write on a social

or religious subject with absolute "fairness;" and in the case of the Hindu society and religion this "fairness" is impossible in another sense,—the subject itself is one which is utterly incapable of any exhaustive or even adequate treatment. For, as Sir Monier Williams says in his *Religious Life and Thought in India*, "Religion is ever present to a Hindu's mind. It colours all his ideas. It runs through every fibre of his being. It is the very Alpha and Omega of his whole earthly career. He is born religious, and dies religious. He is religious in his eating and drinking, in his sleeping and waking, in his dressing and undressing, in his rising up and sitting down, in his work and amusement. Nay, religion attends him in antenatal ceremonies long before his birth, and follows him in endless offerings for the good of his soul long after death." Every word of this statement is as true to-day as it was in Sir Monier Williams' time; and the result is that to write an exhaustive account of the Hindu fasts and feasts is really equivalent to writing a complete history of the Hindu people from the Aryan immigration into India down to the present day; and such a task would be as stupendous as the famous Hindu legend about the "Churning of the Ocean" by the gods and giants in the earliest infancy of the world,—a task, therefore, that can fitly be undertaken by one who is either a god or a giant.

In the second place, I had to contend against the difficulty caused by the absence of written authorities on a vast number of points touched in these pages. Where written authorities exist, they were sometimes inaccessible, sometimes conflicting, sometimes

unauthentic. I have, therefore, been obliged to rely chiefly on tradition and personal experience, and where even these have failed, I have had to fall back upon that last resort of all writers on Folklore — conjecture.

My last word in the Preface must, like my first, be a word of gratitude—of respectful gratitude to the Honorable Sir James Scorgie Meston, K.C.S.I., Lieutenant-Governor of the United Provinces, and to the Honorable Mr. C. F. de la Fosse, M.A., Director of Public Instruction, whose kind appreciation of some of these essays in the Press has greatly encouraged me in my task of republishing them in book form.

MUIR COLLEGE, ALLAHABAD : A. C. M.

April 10th, 1916.

CONTENTS

I

Makara Sankranti

Makara Sankranti, popularly called "Khichri," is a festival held in celebration of the sun's northern course in the heavens. This bending of the solar course takes place exactly at that point of time when the sun enters the sign of 'Makara' or Capricorn. The precise moment varies from year to year. In the year 1914, for instance, the exact time of the sun's change of course was 12 hours, 8 minutes, 18 seconds, Calcutta time. The Sanskrit term 'Makara,' however, does not signify what the Latin 'Capricorn' does: it means an 'alligator.' But this is only a difference in nomenclature which is immaterial, for both names stand for the same section of the astronomical heavens. 'Makara' is also the Sanskrit name of the month which commences with the sun's entrance into the sign of the zodiac called by that name,—a month which is commonly called 'Mágh' in these provinces. Makarà Sankranti is thus a kind of New Year's festival, marking the sun's attainment of the most southern point in the ecliptic, and the commencement

of the northerly course, or what in religious phraseology is called "Uttarâyana." Astronomically, it is a new year's day indeed, and it occurs within two weeks of the conventional New Year's Day of the civilised world; for Makara Sankranti invariably falls between the 12th and the 14th of January each year. A new year's day is a day of rejoicing everywhere in the world, and the Hindus have always observed their own in their own customary style,—by a bath in the Ganges, followed by sober feasting.

Makara Sankranti originally became a day of rejoicing as marking the termination of the inauspicious month of *Paus* (or *Poos*) which, in India, or at least in certain parts of it, is regarded as a peculiarly ill-omened month. For this reason, sacred cerémonies of all kinds, and even the undertaking of journeys or shifting abode from one house to another, are forbidden in this month. Hence the last day of this month, or more precisely the first day of the next, is celebrated as a 'festival of good cheer,' notably in Bengal and in Southern India, in both of which places the day is observed by free indulgence in the eating of cakes, sweets, puddings, and other vegetarian delicacies, in the preparation of which the Hindu matron is a renowned specialist. These excellent dishes are known by a multiplicity of culinary names, but many of them have now become as mythical as their origin, and survive only

in their names. In the United Provinces, the festival is popularly called 'Khichri,' after a well-known Indian dish consisting of a mixture of rice and some kind of *dál*, and this article of food forms the customary dish of the day. The Indian 'Khichri' has many grades of quality, from the humblest to the highest, to suit all ranks. The Emperor Aurangzeb is said to have been particularly fond of one variety, called 'Biryani Khichri.' Uncooked 'khichri' is also given away to the poor, and offered to priests and Brahmans, accompanied by presents of cash and sweets. These sweets, too, are of a prescribed order: they must contain an ingredient of sesamum, the eating of which in some form is especially recommended in the month of Magh, probably as a preventive against chills.

Makara Sankranti is one of the great bathing days in the Hindu calendar. A bath at the confluence in Prayaga (Allahabad) on this day is believed to be fraught with incalculable spiritual merit, and this belief is perpetuated in an old saying—"On the day of an eclipse, bathe at Kashi (Benares); on the day of Makara, at Prayaga; and on the day of Ram Navami, at Ayodhya;" these three baths being pre-eminently the holiest in the whole year. Makara Sankranti is the opening day of the annual religious fair at Allahabad, officially called the Magh Mela, which lasts for a whole month, during which the

orthodox bathe in the Tribeni every morning before sunrise, abstain from grain food during the day-time, and reside in the close vicinity of the Ganges in thatch-built huts erected especially for this purpose. These huts are built as near the water's edge as possible, and the whole month of Magh is often spent in camp life on the river's bank, which is piously known as "Kalpa Bás." The length of residence is reduced in special cases, such as that of people who cannot afford, owing to pressing duties, to spend a longer time out of home; and three days are in such exceptional cases held to be as good as thirty. The whole month of Magh is a bathing season, but particular days are marked out above the rest as especially important. These are, besides the Sankranti, (1) the *Amavasya* or new moon of Magh, (2) *Basanta Panchami*, or the fifth day of the light half of the same month, (3) *Achala Saptami*, or the seventh day of the same fortnight, (4) the *Ekadashi*, or eleventh day, which is always a sacred day, and (5) the *Maghi Purnamashi*, or full moon, after which the assemblage of bathers begins to break up.

The religious observances connected with this great bathing festival at Prayaga are laid down in an ancient work, called the *Prayaga Mahatmya*, which is supposed to be a part of the *Matsya Purana*, a work dealing with the life and adventures

of the Fish Incarnation of Vishnu. The bath must be preceded by an equally obligatory rite, the shaving of the head and face,—hair being considered an unclean excrescence of the body which must be shaved off before a purificatory bath can be of complete efficacy. Men who have their father alive are exempted from the necessity of shaving off the moustaches, and women who have husbands, or maidens who are still unmarried, are not required to have their heads shaved. The same exemption appears to have been granted to persons who are permanent residents of Allahabad, presumably because their hair, whether cut at home or on the banks of the holy stream, is sure to find its way into the waters of the Ganges sometime or other during the rainy season. The *Prayaga Mahatmya* promises release from ten thousand rebirths for every single hair above the chin which finds its rest in the Ganges. But the thousands and tens of thousands who annually assemble at Allahabad to bathe in the Ganges in Magh, hardly ever bear the idea of spiritual merit as a distinctly conscious end in their minds; they traverse miles and miles of rough country, cheerfully enduring hunger, fatigue, and cold, plodding on their path from sunrise to sunset, for weeks together, lying down by the roadside on the bare ground to pass the chilly night under a tree, with no clothing but a coarse

country blanket or a tattered *rezai* (quilt), not because they can accurately measure the quantity or value of the spiritual good they are to reap from these toilsome marches, or from the bath which is to come at the end of them, but only because they regard the whole as a simple duty—a duty that they owe to their neighbours and to their religion, and from the performance of which, therefore, they expect no remuneration or reward, here or hereafter. Ask any individual among the surging multitude as to why he has to come to bathe, and he will tell you "because he ought to bathe." This word 'ought' possesses a solemn meaning in the mind of a devout Hindu, to whom a duty is a duty, the why and the wherefore of which it is not his business to inquire into or discuss. His whole duty, in the case of a duty, is to do it, without looking within for the motive, or without for the consequences, or even around for the approval or disapproval of the world. Let a Hindu be told by proper authority that such and such a thing is his duty (*dharma*), and nothing will shake his resolution or daunt his spirit. Difficulty, hardship, self-mortification—these act as *allurements* on the pious Hindu heart; and to be convinced of this paradox one has only to witness a Magh Mela and study the attitude of the myriads that flock to Prayaga by every available route, defying hunger and cold, disease

and accident, for no other business than to bathe at the confluence and to visit the shrine of Bharadwaja. For the one is held to be incomplete without the other, and hence throughout the bathing season one can see an unceasing stream of pilgrims passing between the Tribeni and the temple of Prayaga's presiding sage, Bharadwaja.

Uttarayana is also commemorated as the day on which Bhishma, the octogenarian leader of the Kuru forces in the *Mahabharata*, after discoursing for many days on the duties and mysteries of Life and Death as he lay wounded on the battle-field, pierced by innumerable arrows, emancipated his soul from the thraldom of flesh by an act of will. This does not mean that he committed what in law is called suicide. The Hindus believe that, while the hour of death is unalterably fixed by Fate in the case of the majority of men, the pious soul that has all through life been in communion with its God, acquires the power of releasing itself from the bondage of the body *at will*,—that is, of prolonging life up to any limit it chooses, and also of terminating it at any point ; and cases of voluntary surrender of life (*deha-tyaga*) have been witnessed even in this sceptic age, among men who were neither 'saints' nor 'sages,' but humble householders who did their life's duties like other men, and, while living *in* the world, lived always *above* it.

II

Ganesha Chaturthi.

Ganesha Chaturthi is one of those Hindu festivals that are not honoured by a public holiday. Ganesha is one of the most popular deities of the Hindus, so much so that he is worshipped before every important domestic occurrence and before every important public or private worship. His name is also invoked at the beginning of every book in the simple stereotyped formula "*Sri Ganeshai Namah*" ('I bow to Ganesha'), with which every Sanskrit book opens. The name of Ganesha is also uttered in pious veneration at the time of starting on a journey, or launching a new venture, or building a new house, or even drawing up a list of articles to be purchased for a happy ceremony that may be in prospect. The character in which Ganesha figures most conspicuously in Indian legend is that of *Vighna-nashak* (or remover of untoward impediments); and he is just as often invoked by another title, which only avoids the negative form,—namely, that of *Siddhidata* or 'bestower of success.' These two epithets have been so frequently associated with the character

of this deity that they have become actual surnames of Ganesha, and have materially contributed to add to his popularity not only among the educated classes of Hindus, but also among the illiterate masses, who reverence him just as deeply, in order that they might not have to suffer disappointment in their humble undertakings.

Apart from these somewhat utilitarian considerations, Ganesha is, in himself, one of the most interesting gods of the Hindu pantheon. He is the son of Shiva and Parvati, and this high descent is enough to entitle him to high veneration from Hindus of all classes. But he is also the god of wisdom and the patron of learning, and as such wins the homage of the highest of sages. Yudhishtira, King of the Pandavas, Damayanti, queen of the Nishadas, and even Indra, Lord of the Heavens, are said to have worshipped Ganesha and obtained their desired ends at his hands. The images of Ganesha that we come across in Hindu temples—and wherever there is a symbol of Shiva, there, too, we find an image of Ganesha—represent him as a short fat figure, of a somewhat pale colour, with a protuberant belly, four arms, and the head of an elephant (including the trunk) resting on his shoulders. In one hand he holds a conch shell, in another a revolving disc, in a third a club or mace, and in the fourth a water-lily. His *vahan* or vehicle

is the rat. His elephant's head has a full trunk coiled artistically about the throat and shoulder, but only one tusk, the other having been lost in a scuffle that he had had with Parasurama. This Parasurama was a fanatic Brahman who became the deadly enemy of all Kshattriyas, and who in his racial wrath made no less than three wholesale massacres of the Kshattriya race in India.

Every little detail in the figure of Ganesha, such as we find placed in the niche of a temple of Shiva, has an emblematic meaning and a storied origin that can be traced in one or other of the *Puranas*. The legends that cluster round the personage of Ganesha are many and varied, and the most important of them are recorded in the *Ganesha Khanda* (the chapter on Ganesha) of the *Brahma Vaivarta Purana*. The same events are often differently described in different legends. Even the account of his birth varies in essential particulars in various authorities. One legend represents that he sprang from the scurf of Parvati's body. Parvati was married some years to Shiva, but had no issue, and her heart began to yearn for a child. One day, as Shiva had gone out to gather flowers on Mount Kailasa, and Parvati was left at home, she wished to have a bath. Before plunging into water, she rubbed her body with oil, and from the scurf that dropped off her skin, she made a little human figure

into which she breathed life. The doll, thus animated, became a handsome boy, and she named him Ganesha. She then asked this creation of hers to guard the door of the house until she finished her bath. It so happened that Shiva himself turned up at the door the very next moment. Ganesha's orders were to guard the entrance, and he took this to mean that he was not to allow anybody to enter, whoever it might be, without any further reference to his mother. He knew not Shiva ; he never suspected that it was his own father seeking to enter his own house ; nor did Shiva either suspect who this strange boy might be. Shiva at first tried to coax the little door-keeper, and then mingled threats with cajolery ; but Ganesha was quite clear about his orders. Shiva was filled with wrath at this boyish obstinacy ; and in his rage he cut off Ganesha's head and made a forcible entry. When Parvati, coming out of her bath, saw Ganesha lying murdered, she was filled with grief and dismay, and in her sorrow she refused to speak to her husband, insisting that the boy should be restored to life. Shiva promised to bring her son back to life, and with that end he despatched his spirit-messengers to all parts of the earth with orders to bring the head of the first living creature (no matter of what species) that should be found sleeping with his head turned

towards the north. Shiva's aerial messengers roamed about hither and thither for a long time, but were unable to find any human creature sleeping with head turned northwards. They at last found an elephant lying in that position, and they instantly cut off his head and brought it to Shiva who, fain to find a head for a head, fixed it to Ganesha's body, and Ganesha sprang forth to life again, half man, half elephant. The above legend accounts for the superstition that forbids Hindus to sleep with their head towards the north—a prohibition that is binding to this day. There is, however, a second reason for this avoidance of the northern aspect in sleep—namely, that in this position the feet of the sleeping person would be pointed towards the regions of the dead, and this would be an act of irreverence to departed ancestors.

The name 'Ganesha' is sometimes etymologically split up into two words, *gana* and *eesha* (' lord of the spirits '), and this derivation has led some European scholars to think that Ganesha is only a tutelary deity, a vulgar intermixture of the divine and the demoniac. This notion has become corroborated in some minds by a strange verse from an ancient version of Manu, which purports to lay down that " Shiva is the god of the Brahmans, Vishnu of the Kshattriyas, Brahma of the Vaishyas, and Ganesha of the Sudras." There can be no doubt that this

division and distribution is absolutely fanciful ; there is nothing in present-day religious practice to show that any such allotment of gods, based on the fourfold division of the Hindu people, was ever made or followed. Brahmans and all other castes are as much worshippers of Ganesha as the Sudras, whose special deity he is supposed to be. Ganesha derives his popularity from the fact of his being the son of the 'great god' Shiva; and his mother, Parvati, is no other than Durga, the goddess of victory, the mighty Mother of the Universe, the grand personification of the principle of Power or Fecundity in Nature. Hence Ganesha is an object of devout adoration for Shaivas and Shaktas alike—all those, in fact, who care for the acquisition of wisdom and learning, or who, wanting in these themselves, admire the same in others. The character in which Ganesha appears most frequently in Hindu mythology is as the god of wisdom, the patron of letters, and the bestower of success in difficult and hazardous undertakings. His elephant's head is an emblem of all-comprehensive wisdom, and even his *vahan*, the rat, is well-known for its sagacity. There is a beautiful myth illustrating Ganesha's precocious wisdom. Ganesha and his brother, Kartik, had once a boyish dispute as to which of them was the elder of the two, and the dispute was referred to Shiva for decision. Shiva did not know what to say ; for,

in truth, the question was hard to decide, Ganesha being a boy not 'born' in the ordinary way at all. He gave his decision most impartially by ruling that whichever of the two boys would make a tour round the world in the shorter time, would thereby prove himself the elder. Now, Kartik's *vahan* is the peacock, and this gave him a decided superiority over the rat-mounted Ganesha. Sitting on the back of his winged carrier, Kartik flew off immediately to make a circuit of the world, and in a short time disappeared from view. But Ganesha, instead of setting out on the tour, quietly made a circuit round his parents, and bowing before them claimed the prize of victory. "But you never went round the globe," said Shiva. "No," replied Ganesha, "but I went round my parents who represent to me all that is comprehended in the term 'world.'" This bit of well-timed philosophy clinched the question in dispute, and Ganesha was thereafter acknowledged as the eldest son of Shiva.

Ganesha Chaturthi is the day sacred to Ganesha. It is observed on the fourth day of the waning moon of Magh. By the common people the day is known as 'Sakat,' which is a corruption of the Sanskrit word *Sankat*, meaning 'difficulty.' Ganesha Chaturthi is also called Sankat Chaturthi, in allusion to one of the chief attributes of Ganesha, that of remover of difficulties. The festival is, at least in the

United Provinces, observed almost exclusively by the women-folk, chiefly those who have sons, as the observance of it by a mother is believed to bring long life and prosperity to the son. As Durga is the ideal of mothers, so is Ganesha the ideal of sons, and by worshipping him, therefore, mothers hope to earn for their own sons a fair measure of the sterling virtues which distinguish Ganesha among the gods. The way in which women observe this festival is by keeping an absolute fast for the whole day, and worshipping Ganesha at night, just at the moment when the moon is seen rising above the eastern horizon. This takes place between 9 and 10 o'clock at night. The worship consists in offering to the god a kind of dry pudding made of sesamum and unrefined sugar, loosely piled upon a brass tray so as to be of the shape of a miniature mountain, while on a wooden board or low stool, placed alongside of this tray, are ranged together a number of conical figures made of cowdung. The pile of sweetened sesamum in the tray is supposed to be a ram or wolf represented with a big head, which is then severed from the trunk with a blade of *durva* grass. This is usually done by a priest, who gets as his fee the sesamum head of this emblematic ram or wolf, together with a small cash present. The *puja* being over, the women and children of the house sit together, and the oldest matron of the family then

recites the "Katha," or the legend appropriate to the day, and the others listen. The tale of Ganesha Chaturthi has varying versions like every other traditional story handed down from mouth to mouth for countless generations. One version, which the present writer has listened to year after year in his own family runs as follows:—

There was once a poor Brahman householder who made a precarious living on the charity of his neighbours, without making any attempt at earning a surer livelihood by other means. When the festival of Ganesha Chaturthi came near, his wife scolded him for leading an indolent life at home, and not making any effort to seek a living by going abroad. "We have not enough even for daily bread," said she, "how is it possible for me to keep the observance of our sacred festivals? I cannot become so irreligious as to dispense with the customary *pujas* enjoined by our *Shastras*: I would much sooner dispense with a meal occasionally than abandon our family gods. I must celebrate the worship of Ganesha on the appointed day, but have not the wherewithal to perform the ceremony—not even a handful of sesamum or a pinch of sugar. You must therefore leave home instantly, and get me the requisite articles of worship anyhow you can." The Brahman calculated that the handiest way of procuring these would be by breaking into a *Bania's*

shop by night and committing a little harmless theft in the name of Ganesha. Shortly after nightfall, the Brahman crept into a grocer's stall, but being in, his conscience began to smite him for the contemplated sin. Standing in the middle of the shop the Brahman felt his movements paralysed, and he reasoned aloud: " If I steal any sesamum, it would be a sin; if I steal any sugar, it would again be a sin. There is no escape from sin." The owner of the shop, who was somewhere within earshot, started up at this strange soliloquy, and, fearing it was some ghost or spirit that had entered the shop, exclaimed in a voice quaking with fear: "I beseech you, tell me who you are, and I am ready to do your bidding like a slave. Are you the Lord Chauth himself? I will give you as much sesamum and sugar as you can carry, if only you will mercifully make your exit." The Brahman replied that he was not the Lord Ganesha at all, but only an indigent Brahman who had been driven by the scolding of his wife to stoop to an act of shame from which his heart was rebelling. But this truthful confession was more than the *Bania* could believe, and he still took the honest Brahman to be some evil spirit, to appease whom he asked the intruding voice to carry off as much sesamun and sugar as it pleased. The Brahman cheerfully accepted the generous gift, and taking a fair quantity of either

stuff, came home to his wife with joy. And his wife worshipped Ganesha therewith, and through the blessing of the god, the Brahman was made a happy and prosperous man.

There is another popular story connected with the festival of Ganesha Chaturthi, which, though somewhat vulgar in colouring, seems, in the lessons that it teaches, to have had a cultured origin. It tells us that there were once two neighbours, one well-to-do and the other poor. One day the poor man was discovered to have suddenly become rich, and his rich neighbour came to him and asked him how he had grown so wealthy all at once. He replied that his wife had worshipped Ganesha on the night of the Ganesha Chaturthi by offering to the god just a handful of sesamum and *gur*, and that the god had become so pleased with the offering as to visit his hut personally. He and his wife were sleeping in a room, when they were awakened by a voice speaking in the little closet where the *puja* had been held but an hour or so ago: "I am very pleased with you." "Who is that?" cried out the wife in alarm. "It is I, Chauth Gosain," replied the voice. "Well," said the woman, "what do you want?" She suspected it was some thief or rogue that had broken into the house, and she therefore wakened her husband, and the two stood on their guard, keeping, however,

inside their room. The voice spoke again, "I want to ease myself." There could be no mistake now: it must be a lunatic that had entered their house; and the poor couple thought it best to humour the fellow. So the woman replied, "Well,—there are four corners in the room where you are, and you may ease yourself in one of those." A few minutes later, the same voice spoke again, "I want to make water;" and the woman gave the same reply. It was now past midnight. All possibility of sleep was gone, and man and wife kept broad awake, expecting to see worse and worse forms of the same madness. In the third quarter of the night, the voice cried again, "I want to weep." The same reply was of course again given, as it had at least satisfied the supposed lunatic so far as to prevent him from showing his madness in a more aggressive form. In the last quarter of the night, the voice spoke for the last time, "I want to laugh." But the same reply was again given, although a different one could have been tried, considering that the dawn was already breaking in the east, and help could be more readily procured in case the madman attempted violence. But before it was quite dawn, the madman had taken his exit, and daylight revealed a miracle in each of the four corners of the closet where the supposed madman had played his supposed pranks. The little room was heaped with gold and

gems, and at the sight of these the poor man and his wife burst into tears of repentance. The god Ganesha himself had visited their humble dwelling, and how discourteously they had treated Him who had in one night converted their little hut into a treasure-house. Now, the rich neighbour listened to this tale with eager interest, gaping with profound wonder at the thought of a poor man's rising to such a fortune in the course of a single night. He questioned him in detail as to the exact procedure he had adopted in the worship of Ganesha on that blissful night, the exact kind of offering he had made, the exact quantity of each article, and so on, determining in his mind to do the same on the next occasion of the *puja*. He told all this to his wife, and the wife, too, visited her neighbour's wife, and personally verified all the details of the ceremony that her husband had reported to her. And then she impatiently awaited the arrival of the sacred day. The days seemed in her impatience to pass most languidly. Of course, she was in no needy circumstances, but rather sufficiently rich to have no hankering for more. But still the sight of her upstart neighbour gave rise in her heart to the ambition of outshining him in wealth and splendour; hence the keen longing, the restless impatience with which both she and her husband looked forward to the auspicious day. And now

the auspicious day had come, and preparations for the *puja* were made in rigid conformity with the details that had been followed by their neighbour. Just a handful of sesamum, only a little grain of *gur* were offered in the worship ; the smallest room in the house was chosen for the ceremony ; and, after the carefully-studied rites were over, man and wife betook themselves to sleep in the next room, choosing to lie down on the bare ground, because their neighbour had done so. But neither of them could summon a wink of sleep in expectation of the blessed visitation. They had not to wait long. The expected voice was heard at the expected hour ; and, truly enough, it spoke the same words. Naturally, the same reply was given which the woman had so carefully conned. Everything happened exactly as had happened to her neighbour,—the same voice speaking the same words, at the same hours, and receiving the same replies in the same semi-sarcastic tone. For even the tone of the reply had been studiously copied by a year's rehearsal. The last reply was given just as the dawn was breaking in the eastern sky. Everything was now indeed complete : no detail was wanting, and the woman's heart was leaping with joy as at daylight she opened the door of the little room to gather the heaps of gold and gems. But there was another kind of miracle awaiting

her eyes. Instead of the gold and gems she had expected to find, the whole room was filled with human excrement, flooded with urine, and giving forth a horrible stench! The woman was horrified, and fell back in her terror. Loudly she denounced her innocent neighbour for having, as she thought, deluded her with a concocted lie. The next moment she blamed herself for putting faith in an upstart's words; and the next moment stormed at her neighbour for practising such a villainous trick upon her. The news soon leaked out, and her neighbours came, some to sympathise with her others to laugh at her folly. But there was one among them who saw through the meaning of the whole comic tragedy. She explained that the fault was neither in the god, nor in the neighbour who had told the truth, but in the silly woman's own heart that had yielded to temptation when it should have resisted it, that had fallen a prey to avarice when it should have rested in contentment, that had entertained the vile ambition of outshining a neighbour in wealth instead of trying to excel him in piety. She was already rich and well-to-do, and the proper way for her to worship the god would have been in a style befitting her wealth and position. Instead of doing that, she had blindly followed the humble style of her humble neighbour; she had even had the audacity to speak to the god, knowing that it was a god she was

addressing, in the same semi-sarcastic tone that had been used by her neighbour in ignorance ; and she had therefore well merited the punishment which had visited her.

III

Basanta Panchami

Basanta Panchami is the fifth day of the light-half of Magh, and is so called because it is regarded as the first day of the Indian spring—'Basanta' being the Sanskrit name of the spring season. The great spring festival of India is, however, not the one that bears the name of spring, but another which comes off some six weeks later,—namely, the Holi. But the Holi is a spring festival in the sense that it is a day of popular rejoicing, following closely upon or immediately preceding the harvesting of the spring crops; whereas Basanta Panchami marks the commencement of the spring season from the astronomical point of view.

Why the advent of the spring season should be a festive occasion in a tropical country, is not quite obvious, for in no part of the plain regions of India, where this festival is honoured by some kind of observance, are the rigours of the winter season at any time so severe as to make the approach of spring a looked-for event. The mild Indian winter has no terrors for even the poorest Indian peasant,

as long as he can enjoy the warm sunshine by day, and can gather a heap of dry leaves to provide him with a flicker of fire at nightfall, just before he lays himself down on his pallet and covers himself up with his rude blanket in his low-roofed, mud-built, air-tight hut, from which he can defy the winter's wind and frost. Nor does the Indian winter cause any perceptible decay of vegetation to make it anything like the dreary season it is in colder climates. Nevertheless, the arrival of the spring season, heralded by the melodious notes of the cuckoo and by the sweet breath of mango blooms wafted upon the breeze, has even in India been the constant theme of delight to Indian poets, who revel no less in the joys and beauties of the vernal season than the greatest Nature poets of English literature. It is probably these Indian poets that have elevated Basanta Panchami to the dignity of a festival, for there was originally nothing religious about the day, and it is still, in many parts of India, observed as a mere secular festival, with no celebration connected with it, except that young men wear a turban or scarf dyed in yellow, in allusion to the popular meaning of the term 'Basanta' which signifies 'yellow.' But it is doubtful whether the word *Basanta* originally meant what it does now, or whether this meaning is derived from the custom of wearing yellow on the day of Basanta Panchami.

The presumption that it is the ancient Sanskrit poets who have actually founded the Basanta festival, is corroborated by another custom which prevails in those parts of the Province where families of 'Bhats' are still found. The Bhats are a class of indigenous bards, who at one time possessed such poetic skill that they could sing extempore songs on any subject given to them, and could also carry on a long dialogue in verse with a member of their own fraternity. The custom among them is to present sprays of mango bloom to one another and to their friends, on the morning of Basanta Panchami.

This friendly present is sometimes accompanied by short poetical recitations in praise of spring, or as a compliment paid to the friend himself. The Bhats are by caste Brahmans whose ancestral occupation was in ancient times to compose songs and odes, and recite them on ceremonious occasions before public and private gatherings. Some of them still uphold their ancient calling, but have adopted other pursuits in addition, to serve as a means of livelihood. For the poet's office, which was in ancient India a highly lucrative one, in consequence of the patronage of princes and nobles, has now ceased to be an avenue to wealth or fortune.

It is probably our Indian poets, again, who have connected Basanta Panchami with the worship

of Saraswati, the goddess of speech and learning, the goddess most invoked, most adored, by ancient writers. Saraswati is often styled the Minerva of Hindu mythology; but this designation is really too narrow; she combines in herself the functions of all the nine Muses of Greek mythology, presiding over the whole domain of letters, arts, and sciences, which Hindu philosophers have divided into sixty-four branches.

Some European scholars have been led into another error in trying to understand the true character of Saraswati: they have confounded the river Saraswati of Vedic literature with the goddess Saraswati of Brahmanical writings. They speak as though the latter had evolved out of the former, and their only reason, besides the identity of the two names, seems to be the fact that the goddess is a latter conception than the river-deity. Dr. Muir has even endeavoured to furnish an explanation of how the river Saraswati became gradually transfigured into the goddess of speech and learning. He says: "When once the river had acquired a divine character, it was quite natural that she should be regarded as the patroness of the ceremonies which were celebrated on the margin of her holy waves, and that her direction and blessing should be invoked as essential to their proper performance and success. The connection into which she was

thus brought with sacred rites may have led to the further step of imagining her to have an influence on the composition of the hymns which formed so important a part of the proceedings, and of indentifying her with Vach, the goddess of speech."

The above is no doubt a very ingenious exposition of the origin of the goddess Saraswati ; but the Hindu people still regard the two Saraswatis as absolutely distinct. The river Saraswati of the *Vedas* and the goddess Saraswati of the *Puranas* have nothing in common save the name, nor did the latter ' evolve ' out of the former, except in so far as we may say that the *Puranas* were ' evolved ' out of the *Vedas*. That the river is frequently spoken of as a goddess, is no proof that the river-deity was beginning to undergo transformation into the goddess of learning. Even if the river-deity is invoked by the authors of Vedic hymns, this is little evidence to show that she is being metamorphosed into another goddess. The river Saraswati is still revered as a goddess, only she has been relegated to the same rank to which the Godavari or the Narbada, or the Krishna belong. Almost every Indian river is regarded as a sacred stream, and personified as a god or goddess. There is no doubt that to the early Aryans the river Saraswati was what the Ganges is to their descendants ; her waters were instinct with divinity in every inch of

her course ; and her influence must have inspired the composers of the Vedic hymns. There is also no doubt that she is often invoked as the goddess of speech and the patroness of science ; but this may be only the language of poetic personification. The Saraswati of the Puranas is a distinct personage from the Saraswati of the Vedas, and the confounding of the one with the other only reminds one of the historic confusion made by Burke, in one of his speeches on the impeachment of Warren Hastings, between Hafiz Rahmat Khan, chief of the Rohillas, and the Persian poet Hafiz. The river-deity is now no longer recognised as a goddess entitled to practical adoration, among other reasons because the stream itself has practically dried up. Like other Vedic deities, such as Indra, or Agni, or Vayu, she has long become too classical to satisfy the modern demand for more and more personality and less and less abstraction in the gods and goddesses of the Hindu religion.

Thus arose the conception of Saraswati as a personal goddess, a goddess presiding over speech and letters, and patronising every branch of literature, science, and art. She is represented as a maiden of snowy white complexion, arrayed in a cloth of spotless white, and sitting on a white full-blown lotus. Everything about her is white. Even her *vahan*, the swan, is famous for the white purity of

its feathers. She has no superfluity of limbs, such as, for instance, the ten arms of her mother Durga, but is pictured in every way like a human maiden of peerless beauty. She is the daughter of Shiva and Durga, and the wife of Brahma, the Creator. In one hand she holds a book, in the other a *vina* or harp, for she is also the goddess of music. Everything white is pleasing to her ; hence the flowers used in worshipping her must be white, as also the sandal paste. In the *puja*, she is sometimes represented by a clay image, and sometimes only by a diagrammatic figure depicted on the side of a brass or copper jug filled with water, in front of which are arranged in neat order, books, pen, ink-stand, and other writing materials, except ink ; one or two musical instruments like the guitar or tambourine ; a lighted *chirag*, burning *ghee*, not oil, etc. Ink is not placed among the writing materials offered to the goddess, because ink is generally of a black colour, and black is repulsive to the goddess. The pen offered in the worship of Saraswati is the old Indian pen, cut from a reed, and not the imported steel pen of our own day. The offerings are made to this emblematic jug, and the prayers of the worshippers are likewise addressed to it. In some houses, of course, a clay image is set up, and the worship is consequently on a much grander scale.

The offerings special to Saraswati are unripe ears

of barley and grains of gram, and sprays of mango bloom, plums, sweets prepared from white sesamum, and other edibles. After the *puja* proper, comes what is called the *Pushpanjali*, a ceremony which consists in the offering of flowers to the goddess by a group of worshippers, who stand in a semicircle in front of the image or the consecrated jug, and recite a prescribed prayer in chorus to the leading voice of the priest or the head of the family who may be conducting the worship. For the head of the family himself sometimes performs the *puja*, if he is a Brahman ; but if he is not a Brahman, he has to call in a priest to officiate at the ceremony. The worship of Saraswati is not confined to any particular caste, though originally the Brahmans alone had this privilege : for, as is well known, all learning was in former times confined to the priestly caste, perhaps more strictly in India than in Europe in the dark ages. No reading or writing is permissible on this day, and athletic sports, gymnastic exercises, concerts, theatrical entertainments, &c., are considered in order. Strict fasting is observed by every one in the family, until the worship is completely over, and this is generally about midday. Even little boys of seven or eight join in the fasting, and do so most cheerfully, hoping in this way to propitiate the goddess, and to reap, as their reward, a successful career at school.

Saraswati is now the favourite goddess of the Hindu student community, and of all others who are engaged in the pursuit of knowledge. She is likewise the chief goddess of schoolmasters, and in Bengal it is the practice of every Pandit who keeps a school to set up an image of Saraswati and invite his patrons and friends to witness the worship and do honour to the goddess. The attendance at these ceremonies is large or small, according to the Pandit's circle of patrons and friends, each of whom makes a cash offering to the goddess at the time of bowing to her; and the money thus collected forms an important part of the Pandit's annual revenue.

A very curious superstition connected with this *puja* prevails among Hindu boys, who regard plums as absolutely forbidden fruit until after the Saraswati puja is over,—that is, until some time after plums have begun to ripen on the tree and to be sold in the bazaar. The belief is that if any boy eats a plum, or even bites one, earlier than the Saraswati puja, he incurs the severe displeasure of the goddess; and this displeasure, in the case of a schoolboy, is interpreted to imply failure in examinations and all the nameless evils that follow in its train. When one has passed the school stage and has boys of one's own, one comes to know better what this prohibition means; but alas! by that time the temptation for plums has ceased to act. Plums are a kind of fruit

never very wholesome even when perfectly ripe, but if eaten too early in the season they are actually poisonous, especially in the case of the younger folk; hence the solemn injunction that no boy shall taste plums before the day of Saraswati puja, which really seems to have been issued by some wise father in days long past and cleverly foisted upon the goddess Saraswati, to serve as an effective check upon one very common class of mischief that Indian urchins are addicted to; and by making the right kind of appeal to their childish temperament, this innocent delusion has worked successfully for generations, and has now passed into an incontestable article of faith among the juvenile community.

Just as Akshaya Navami is a festival which is utilised for the purpose of sanctifying the field produce of late autumn, by offering the first fruits to the goddess Jagaddhatri, in the same way, Basanta Panchami serves the incidental purpose of offering the first fruits of the early spring crops, such as gram, barley, and peas, to the goddess Saraswati. The goddess Saraswati has of course nothing to do with agricultural operations, and yet the first fruits of the season are offered to her, as being the goddess nearest at hand, because the Hindu belief is that nothing ought to be used for human consumption which has not been previously sanctified by being offered to a god or goddess—

any one whose festival happens to synchronise with the season for any particular crop of fruit or vegetable or grain.

Saraswati puja is also the day on which Hindu boys begin their alphabet, and quite a little ceremony is made of the matter, the ceremony being known as 'Vidyarambha.' The boy is made to repeat the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, as correctly as he can imitate the sounds, and to trace one or two of them on the ground, with a piece of chalk, his hand being guided by the priest, or by the father or guardian of the boy. This is done in front of the image of the goddess, just before or just after or during the intervals of the worship. The *Vidyarambha* ceremony is usually performed in the fifth year of the boy's age, or, in case that is, for any reason, rendered impracticable, then, in the seventh year, the even number six, as, in fact, all even numbers, being considered unlucky in all auspicious ceremonies, marriage, *Upanayana*, tonsure included. With the revival of education and learning and the growth of knowledge that is taking place in India under British rule, the worship of the goddess Saraswati is becoming more and more universal, and in Bengal, at any rate, she is worshipped in every Hindu household, of which even a single member has received a smattering of some kind of education.

IV

Shivaratri

Shivaratri is a religious fast kept on the fourteenth day of the dark fortnight of the lunar month of *Phalgun*. Literally, the name means 'the night consecrated to Shiva.' Shiva is one of the highest gods of the Hindu pantheon, and he is distinguished from the lesser gods by the title of Mahadeva, or 'the Great God.' He has countless other names corresponding to his countless attributes, or derived from his equally numerous exploits. Outside India he is known as one of the three gods composing what has been erroneously called the Hindu Trinity, in which Shiva figures as the "destroyer." But this conception of Shiva has now become pale and faded in the light of brighter conceptions that arose later, these representing him as a beneficent deity, 'the eternally blessed one,' and 'the causer of blessings.' His personality is also made more interesting by his being represented as a human householder, dwelling with his wife Parvati, and rearing a family of four children—two sons and two daughters, the sons being Ganesha and Kartik, and the daughters, Lakshmi and Saraswati.

Shiva is a god transcending all the other gods in the multiplex character of his personality. Sometimes he is regarded as the divine impersonation of the disintegrating powers of nature, the forces that make for disruption, decay, and death,—in short, as the dread Destroyer, who takes pleasure in destruction for its own sake. In this character, he is believed to be fond of haunting burning-grounds, of playing with the skulls and bones of the dead, and of affecting the society of ghosts and goblins. In this character, too, he is represented as extremely irascible in temper, prone to killing and slaughter on the slightest provocation, and having a wildness and fierceness about his manners that inspires his worshippers with more awe than reverence. On one occasion, the sage Daksha held a great sacrifice to which he invited all the gods, but omitted to ask Shiva and his wife, and the god became so enraged at this that he cut off the head of the sage and replaced it by that of a ram. On another occasion, he burnt up a number of gods by a flash of lightning darted from his third eye, and afterwards smeared his body with their ashes, whence probably the rubbing of ashes on the body has become the distinctive mark of a devotee of Shiva.

Sometimes Shiva is pictured in a different character,—as the divine agent of the reproductive power of nature, whence he derives his names of

Sada-Shiva, Shankara, and Shambhu. It is in this character that he is represented by the familiar, but often misunderstood, symbol of the 'Linga.' Sometimes, again, he is regarded as the grand type of an ascetic who has attained the highest perfection by prayer, penance, and privation. In this character he is pictured as an ordinary human being in the garb of a holy anchorite, with ash-besmeared body and matted locks gathered into a knot about the forehead, wearing a strip of bark or leopard-skin about the loins, and sitting in rapt meditation in the shades of a tree. It is in this character of an invincible ascetic that Shiva scorched to ashes the wayward god of love, Kamadeva, who once endeavoured to seduce him away from his course of self-mortification. Thenceforward Shiva gained complete emancipation from the bondage of passion, and by his example taught mankind the way to gain the height of bliss by voluntary torture of the flesh, by the subjection of turbulent passions, and by undisturbed meditation.

Shiva is sometimes represented with five faces, and then he is known by the name of 'Panchanana;' and he has always three eyes, the third being located in the centre of the forehead. These three eyes are supposed to typify the god's omniscience—his knowledge of the past, present and future. He is said to have a blue-coloured throat, whence his

name of 'Nil-Kantha;' and he is said to have derived the hue from his having drunk up the poison which foamed forth from the sea-surface, at the churning of the ocean—a primordial occurrence, very frequently mentioned in Hindu mythology as the originating cause of a number of objects that figure in subsequent myths. His *vahan* is the bull, and hence an image of this creature is to be seen in every temple dedicated to Shiva.

The month specially sacred to Shiva is *Sravan* (July-August); the *tithi* (phase of the moon) favourable to his worship is the Trayodashi, or the thirteenth day of the dark fortnight; and the day of the week that is picked out for the keeping of vows made to him, is Monday. Shivaratri is a sort of extraordinary occasion for the worship of Shiva, who is commonly worshipped every day in a very simple form—namely, by the pouring of a jug of water over the Lingum set up in the nearest temple, or, simpler still, by bathing in water any smooth stone boulder that might have been placed by any pious-minded rustic at the foot of a *peepul* tree anywhere on the roadside or in the middle of a village grove.

The exact origin of the Shivaratri fast is lost in the dimness of the past, but the festival happens to be mentioned in the *Mahabharata*. This of course by no means furnishes any clue as to the date of its origin, for, apart from the fact that the chronological

value of the epic is greatly lost by a multiplicity of later interpolations, the festival is described in one of the concluding books of the poem—the *Shanti Parva*, which some authorities believe to be wholly apocryphal. As it is, a pretty detailed exposition of the *Mahatmya* (or religious efficacy) of the Shivaratri vow is put into the mouth of Bhishma, the octogenarian leader of the Kuru forces in the great battle of Kurukshetra. Bhishma is lying wounded on the battle-field, his body resting on a bed of arrows, and in this posture he discourses to a circle of mourning kinsmen on the principles of duty, the truths of philosophy and the eternal mysteries of life and death. According to the legend thus put into the mouth of the dying hero, the fast of Shivaratri was first publicly observed by King Chitra Bhanu, of the Ikshvaku dynasty, who is said to have been a king ruling over the whole of Jambu-Dwipa, the most ancient name of India—a name even older than Bharata-Varsha, which is derived from King Bharata. Chitra Bhanu was a king as renowned for his piety as for his power, helping the poor, protecting the weak, and honouring Brahmans. Now, once upon a time it so happened that on the day of Shivaratri, as the king and queen were keeping this holy fast, the sage Ashta-Bakra, accompanied by some of his disciples, came on a visit to the court. The king gave them food and gifts

befitting their position. When the sage was preparing to depart, he discovered that the king was abstaining from food and drink that day, and so he asked, "What sorrow has come upon thee that thou hast not taken thy meal to-day? Why art thou putting thy soul to further torture by thus abstaining from food and drink? Know that the human soul is one with God, and it is by giving pleasure to oneself, and not by inflicting pain, that one can best please God." The sage, who by the way, was as famous for his learning as for his deformity of body, being "crooked" in eight different places (whence his name of Ashta-Bakra), was an Epicurean in faith, and held pleasure to be the path to piety. For, as in Greek philosophy, there are two distinct schools of thought in Hindu philosophy, corresponding broadly to the Stoic and the Epicurean, the one advocating self-indulgence, the other self-denial. Chitra Bhanu, thereupon, proceeded to explain why he was keeping a fast that day, and to do so, he had to recount some of the events of his former birth. He told the sage that in his previous life he was a hunter, by name Suswar, who made his living by killing game birds and animals, and selling them in the bazaar. One day, as he was wandering through the forest in search of game, he was overtaken by the darkness of night, and being unable to go back home, climbed up a *bilva*

(wood-apple) tree for shelter. He had shot a deer that day, but had had no time to take it home, or sell it in the market to buy food for himself and his family. Distressed with hunger and thirst, he thought of his poor wife and children who were anxiously expecting his return. He wept, and his tears accompanied by the withered leaves of the *bilva* tree, dropped in showers upon the ground. Now, the god Shiva, who is fond of haunting the shades of *bilva* trees, receiving the shower of tears and the dry leaves of his favourite tree upon his head, thought that some pious votary of his was worshipping him with offerings of water and *belpatra,—bilva* leaves being an indispensable offering in the worship of Shiva on all occasions. Next morning, the hunter returned home, and his wife and children seeing him safe again in their midst, forgot their hunger and their grief. He sold the deer that he had shot on the preceding day, and with the proceeds bought food for himself and his family. It happened that just before he was going to break his fast, a stranger appeared at the door and begged for food. According to Hindu custom, a stranger or guest must be entertained with food before a householder can take his meals; and so this unknown man was served with a share of the meal, before the hunter and his family could break their prolonged fast. Now, the proper observance of a religious fast requires that not only is

the man to abstain from meals on that particular day, but that he shall not take any food even on the next, until he has first fed a Brahman ; and then only is the fast considered complete. This sequel to a fast is called its *Paran*, as its preparatory rites are called the *Sanjut*. The hunter, of course, knew nothing of the fast or of the *Paran* beyond the fact that it was a day of painful starvation to him and to his family, brought on by one of the inevitable accidents of his calling. But through this unforeseen mischance, as he certainly took it to be at the time, he had unconsciously earned not only the merits of the fast itself, but those of the *Paran* as well. The hunter lived for many years after, without any idea of his spiritual gains, until, when the hour of death came, he beheld two spirit-messengers from the god Shiva, sent down for the express purpose of conducting the soul of the pious hunter to the abodes of the blessed on mount *Kailasa*. And there it was that he learned for the first time that he had been so richly rewarded for his observance of a fast on the day of Shivaratri, and that, too, by an accident, as much beyond his control as that swift sunset which had overtaken him in the depths of that dark forest, where on that distant day he had been obliged to spend a night of hunger and tears among the dry-dropping leaves of the *bilva* tree.

The *Mahabharata* legend adds that the hunter lived in the abode of Shiva for thousands of years, at the end of which he was translated to a higher heaven, called *Indra Loka*, the home of Indra, ruler of the skies, where, too, he spent an enormous length of time in the enjoyment of ineffable bliss. He was then promoted to a higher heaven still, called the *Brahma Loka*, the abode of Brahma, the Creator ; and finally he was elevated to *Vaikuntha*, the highest heaven, the celestial mansion of Vishnu himself. After living in these other blissful regions for other long ages of time, the hunter was born again on earth, as heir to the kings of the Ikshvaku dynasty, and then he came to bear his present name of Chitra Bhanu. By special favour of the god Shiva, Chitra Bhanu retained the memory of his past life and, in his new kingly guise, the hunter had made it his rule to observe this annual fast, by the unconscious observance of which he had reaped such a rich harvest of both earthly and spiritual felicity.

The Shivaratri fast is observed to this day in the form in which king Chitra Bhanu is believed to have kept it. Those who undertake it abstain from food and drink during the day, and at night they worship the god Shiva, either in their own house or in some neighbouring temple of the god, themselves or through the medium of a priest. The

poor content themselves with pouring water on the head of an image of Shiva; the rich accompany their elaborate rites with costly offerings to the god and substantial gifts to Brahmans. The offerings that are deemed essential are *bilva* leaves, *dhatura*, rice and water, preferably Ganges water, or, failing that, water from any other running stream. At the conclusion of the worship, wherever it is conducted with some ceremony, the priest or the head of the family recites to the assembled company of worshippers the above legend of the hunter who became a king, and the hearing of this tale is believed to be fraught with blessing.

V

Holi

Holi is the gayest of Hindu festivals. It is celebrated on the day of the full moon concluding the lunar month of *Phalgun*, which roughly synchronises with March. It is a festival of unmixed rejoicing, and commemorates, in its mirth and gaiety, the innocent frolics of the youthful Krishna with the merry milkmaids of Brindaban. Krishna is believed by Hindus of all castes and creeds to have been a divine incarnation, who appeared on earth in the *Dwapara* age—the third of those grand cycles or aeons into which Hindu thinkers have divided Time in its relation to the mundane drama. Some followers of Krishna, who are generally known as Vaishnavas, do not reckon him as one of the *Avatars* or manifestations of the Supreme Being, but as the Supreme Being Himself in human form. Intense faith in a *personal* god is the distinguishing feature of the Vaishnava creed, which is broadly contrasted with its rival creed, Shaktism, or the worship of Power personified in a goddess, or the conception of the Divine Being in a female form.

The Vaishnavas and Shaktas represent two sects between whom there is still a great deal of antagonism, not in matters of faith only, but extending into the practical affairs of life as well. The Vaishnavas, for example, are vegetarians and teetotallers; the Shakta creed does not forbid the use of meat and wine. Holi is the most important Vaishnava festival, and ranks equal to the greatest of Shakta festivals—the Durga Puja, which, like the Holi, is a time of universal rejoicing. But these two rival festivals have now forgotten their old rivalry, and Vaishnavas and Shaktas join each other in celebrating both with the greatest friendship and amity, so far at least as the exterior forms of the worship and the social aspects of each festival are concerned.

Holi is the great spring festival of India, the celebration of it not being confined to any particular parts of the country, but extending all over the land. In this respect, it even excels the Durga Puja, which is the great autumn festival of the Hindus. And spring and autumn are the two great harvest seasons in India, the time when the barns and granaries are full, and when the hearts of the agricultural population of India are for a time sufficiently relieved from the pressure of anxiety for bread to permit them to give themselves over to feasting and merriment. The harvest season

is a festive season not only among the rural population of India, but presumably among farmers of every country, and, figuratively, among other communities as well, and even among the professional classes.

The only religious element in the Holi festival is the worship of Krishna. An image of Krishna as a babe is placed in a little swing cradle, and decorated with garlands of flowers and painted with *gulal*—a kind of crimson powder, also called *abeer*, the use of which by men, women and children is a marked feature of the Holi celebrations even in their social aspect. The swing cradle accounts for the other name by which the Holi is sometimes known—*Dol jatra*, the word *Dol* literally meaning 'a swing.' But the religious element in this festival has, at least in these provinces, disappeared altogether from the external observance, and Holi has now become a purely secular festival characterised by mere rout and revel, with not even the mention of Krishna's name, except in "amorous ditties" also called Holi, relating to the gallantries of that god with the *gopis* of Brindaban.

Probably the most ancient custom connected with the Holi celebration is the lighting of a bonfire early in the morning, an hour or so before sunrise. Bonfires are in every country associated in the minds of men with primitive times, and the Holi

has the distinction of being the only Indian festival honoured by a bonfire. These bonfires are lighted in every village and at street-crossings in towns. The exact origin of this custom of lighting bonfires cannot now be traced with any degree of certainty. There are two or three old legends purporting to indicate the origin, but they only help to lead the inquirer deeper and deeper into a maze ; for not only are these legends humanly incredible, but they have different versions in different localities. According to one legend, the bonfire represents the immolation of a ruthless *Rakshasi* (or female fiend), named Holika, from whose name the festival derived its name of Holi. This Rakshasi used to carry off and devour the children of the surrounding country, and so great was the havoc she caused among the juvenile population of the neighbourhood of her home that the people formed a plot against her, and caught her and burnt her to death. The legend, however, does not tell us either the name or the geographical situation of this ill-fated district. Now, since the burning of this Rakshasi afforded immunity especially to children, it is the younger folk who are especially enjoined in the *Shastras* to make merry during the Holi season.

Another legend says that this female fiend that is burnt in emblem on the morning of the Holi festival, was the sister of king Hirannya Kashyapu,

father of Prahlad. This prince was a fervent adorer of Krishna from his very boyhood. His father was a disbeliever, and he urged the boy to renounce his faith in Krishna, using threats when persuasion seemed to fail. But the boy refused to yield. The enraged father thereupon ordered Prahlad to be trampled to death by an elephant, but the infuriated tusker knelt down before the brave child as he advanced fearlessly towards the beast, chanting the name of Krishna. The boy was then hurled down from the summit of a steep rock to be dashed to death; he was flung into a swollen river to be drowned, but he escaped from both as triumphantly as before.

He was then thrown into a blazing fire to be burnt, but the fire did not even scathe his skin. At last, Prahlad's aunt seized the boy and flung herself into the flames with him. For a while both aunt and nephew vanished from sight, and King Hirannya rejoiced that he had at last made an end of the wicked boy by sacrificing the life of his own sister. The flames soon died down, and in the midst of the encircling smoke the peering eyes of spectators discerned a little boy squatting on the glowing embers, as happily as though they were a heap of flowers. But the aunt had perished in the fire. The Holi bonfire is supposed to commemorate the fate of Prahlad's wicked aunt. This may be true;

but it may also be true that some Vaishnava commentator of our religious books may have found an excellent origin for the Holi bonfire in this story of Prahlad, which is to this day a household tale in India.

Some authorities give a third explanation of the bonfire, which in their opinion represents the death of the old year and the commencement of the new. For, according to an ancient legend, the world was created by Brahma on the first day of *Chaitra*, that is, the day following the Holi. It does not appear probable that the custom of burning a bonfire on the last day of the year has been in existence since the day when Brahma, the Creator, gave birth to the world : more probably the custom originated in the time of Vikramadittya, Raja of Ujjain, the reputed founder of the *Samvat* era, for the *Samvat* year terminates with the Holi. The *Samvat* era, which is 57 years in advance of the Christian era, has still a very wide currency among the Hindus of the United Provinces, and the Benares publication of astrological almanacs is still based on the *Samvat* era. This hypothesis that the Holi bonfire represents the passing away of the old *Samvat* year, gains some weight from the fact that the bonfire is as often called the "burning of Holi" as the "burning of *Samvat*." If this conjecture be true, we may extend our guess a little further and say that

it was probably Vikramadittya himself who first instituted the bonfire, either as a mere token of popular rejoicing, or as a state measure designed in the interests of public health; for the fire provided a ready receptacle for consuming the year's accumulated rubbish in every populated area, large or small. For, we must not forget that the ancient Hindus well understood the hygienic and sanitary virtues of a blazing fire, as in all important ceremonies, domestic or otherwise, in which there is likelihood of any overcrowding, they have invariably prescribed a sacrificial fire, into which are thrown various kinds of offerings, the resulting smoke being held to be extremely efficacious in purifying the atmosphere and thus ensuring a measure of protection to public health.

There is no end of course to conjecture, and where the field of inquiry happens to be a department of Folklore, and the folk concerned, a people of such ancient origin as the Hindus, it easily affords scope to the wildest play of fancy. No doubt, fancy is the only resort where fact is hard to get at; but fancy, once let loose, is very unwilling to furl her wings. One learned writer on the Folklore of Northern India feels inclined, after comparing the Holi bonfires with similar observances in Europe, to think that they are "Sun charms or magical ceremonies intended to ensure a proper supply of

sunshine for men, animals and plants." He admits that the climatic conditions of Northern India do not, as a rule, necessitate the use of incantations to produce sunshine ; but he cautions us to remember "that the native of the country does not look on the fierceness of the summer sun with the same dread as is felt by Europeans ; " and he also gives to the common Indian villager the credit of knowing that "seasonable and sufficient rainfall depends on a due supply of sunshine." It is not quite obvious, however, why the Hindu originators of the Holi bonfire should have been so anxious to ensure a "due supply of sunshine" in that particular part of the year, or in this particular part of the country, to which the custom is almost exclusively confined, seeing that, of all other provinces of India, these have always been most favoured by a plentiful supply of the brightest kind of sunshine.

The Holi bonfire is regarded as a sacred object. Every family, residing in the neighbourhood of the site of a bonfire, considers it its duty to contribute something either in cash or in kind—that is, by presenting logs of wood or basketfuls of cowdung cakes for fuel. By prescriptive right, based on immemorial usage, boys are allowed to seize or pilfer fuel of any kind for the sacred fire, such as the woodwork of deserted dwellings, old stakes and posts, broken furniture, and the like ; and the owner of

these, when cognisant of such thefts, feels it his duty to keep quiet. When the fire is blazing, those present walk round it in token of reverence; and when it has died down, they pour water over the embers, and, before leaving the place, streak their foreheads with the ashes, to bring them luck during the coming year.

The most important function of the day is the "playing with coloured water" (*rung khelna*). Quantities of red-coloured liquid, made by mixing some sort of red pigment in water, are poured by friends upon friends, in friendly merriment; and there are visits from house to house, at each of which this mutual exchange of the sportive liquid takes place. Sometimes, the jovial fluid is dispensed with, and a dry red powder, called *gulal* or *abeer*, often mixed with talc, is smeared on the face as a more refined substitute for the coloured water. But the smearing of the face is permissible only among equals, juniors in age or inferiors in rank being only allowed to place a little of this dry stuff on the foot of the elder or superior, as a mark of respect. The elder or superior, in return, streaks the forehead of the other with a pinch of the same stuff, as a symbol of his blessing. Among the vulgar, however, such niceties of etiquette are quickly forgotten in the excitement of the hour. No one is spared, not even women and children; even domestic animals

are not exempted. As the morning advances the merriment increases, and the companies of merry-makers swell into crowds. In the face of one of these riotous crowds, it is as hard to escape a drenching as to save one's life before a pack of hungry wolves. It is no use praying for exemption, or rendering tender apologies, or making angry protests : such attempts only help to bring on the drenching all the more quickly, and with a vengeance. Among the vulgar, too, muddy water freely takes the place of the coloured liquid, and is squirted through bamboo syringes, right and left, in merciless fashion. Coloured water of some sort is deemed absolutely essential by the illiterate masses, and since pigments and dye-stuffs are rather expensive luxuries, a solution of street dust is held to be a lawful substitute. People of varied taste prepare *rung* in all the colours of the rainbow, though, strictly, only red or pink is orthodox. The only people who abstain from playing with "rung" are widows and those who are in mourning for the death of a relative within the year. Hindu widows are prohibited for the rest of their lives from wearing any colour, either in their garments, or on their skin ; and mourners must, similarly, dress in spotless white from head to foot, during the period of mourning. The merriment reaches its climax at mid-day, when the folks go home and bathe, have their breakfast

and take some rest before beginning the functions of the afternoon. These consist in visits to relatives and friends, and during these visits it is customary for parties to embrace one another. Old quarrels are forgotten, old friendships are revived, new acquaintances are created. Hindus do not object to embracing even Mohamedan friends, just as, during the Mohamedan festival of I'd, Mohamedans do not scruple to embracing their friends among the Hindus. The ignorant consider it a sin to change their red-stained Holi garments for a week after the festival, at the end of which another little festival is held in some parts of the province as a sort of sequel or epilogue.

A curious custom has come to be associated with the Holi festival, the custom of singing obscene songs in public places—a custom that would certainly be more honoured in the breach than in the observance. These obscene songs are supposed to be addressed to the same female fiend that is burnt in emblem in the bonfire; but, unfortunately, they have been diverted from their original aim and are now flung at any young woman that might be passing by the spot where a rude fellow happens to be in a musical mood. These songs are known as *kabeer*, probably after the name of their author; but this discreditable composer could not have been the famous reformer of the sane name, the religious follower of Ramananda,

who conceived the bold idea of uniting Hindus and Musalmans in the worship of one common God. Whoever this debauched bard may have been, he well deserved to have been a kinsman of Dame Holika, in whose honour he first employed his metrical skill.

Holi is not only a day of sportive merriment and of ribald song, but also a day of good cheer, the choicest dishes of Hindu cuisine being prepared and partaken on this day. Even the poorest must have a tasteful meal on the day of Holi ; and those who cannot afford to cook one for themselves, will go and beg it at the houses of the rich rather than go without it on such a sacred day. For the meal taken on the day of the Holi festival is really a new year's banquet, and the belief is that, if they have a hearty meal on the first day of the year, they will have a continuity of such meals through the rest of the year. Meat food is, however, absolutely forbidden, even among those who are not vegetarians, and sweets prepared from milk and curd are held to be in keeping with the dignity of the day.

VI

Sitala Saptami

Sitala Saptami is a purely female festival—if, indeed, it may be called a festival at all, consisting as it does in the offering of propitiatory 'pujas' to the female goddess, Sitala, by her female worshippers. It occurs just one week after the Holi festival—that is, on the seventh day of the waning moon in the dark fortnight of *Chaitra*. In some parts it is held in the bright half of *Sravan*, two days after the Nag Panchami. By many, every moonless Saptami (seventh day of the moon), from the dark fortnight of *Chaitra* to the corresponding fortnight of *Sravan*, is observed as a day sacred to Sitala and celebrated by proper fasts and forms of worship. This shows that there is a whole season of five months which is sacred to Sitala; and devout worshippers of this goddess, who are exclusively females, keep a fast and make offerings to her in each of these months, on the seventh day of the waning moon. Others, who are not so devout, or who are not bound by any vows, worship her on the first or last day of the season.

Sitala is popularly the goddess of the small-pox, and the season in which her worship begins synchronises therefore with the beginning of the small-pox season. It is well known that this dreadful epidemic visits India just at the commencement of the hot weather, and carries on its ravages all through the summer season, subsiding finally when the rains have well set in. It is therefore that the summer months from *Chaitra* to *Sravan* (March to July) have been made sacred to Sitala. Her worshippers believe that if the goddess is properly propitiated by prayer and offerings, she will avert small-pox; whereas if she is offended, she will cause it. The goddess is sometimes identified with the disease itself; hence the particular solicitude with which a patient suffering from small-pox is humoured. Any food that the patient may call for is readily given, regardless whether it is likely to do him harm or good; anything that the patient may say in his delirious raving is reverently attended to, as an utterance inspired by the goddess; any particular kind of service or nursing which the sufferer may demand is unhesitatingly offered, as betokening a command of the goddess. No medicine is allowed to be administered to the patient, who is left completely to the mercy of the goddess. Medicines are believed to be offensive to the goddess, as implying an agency claiming to counteract the divine agency of the goddess. The

utmost cleanliness is observed not only in the sick-room, but everywhere else in the house, as filth and dirt are likely to anger the goddess. Leaves of the *Neem* tree are spread in abundance all over and under the sick bed, and all about the floor of the sick-room, not in reference to any medicinal properties of the *Neem* tree, but because the *Neem* tree is especially sacred to Sitala. Every village boasts of traditions relating how individuals afflicted with small-pox were cured by the special intervention of the goddess, who dictated through the lips of the patients themselves the special forms of propitiation that were necessary in those special cases; and hence, whenever a case of small-pox occurs in a family, the female relations of the patient at once make a vow to Sitala to offer such and such forms of worship to her when the sufferer should recover; and these vows are audibly repeated before the patient constantly during his illness. Sometimes the goddess is believed to communicate her wishes to some near kinsman of the sufferer in a dream; and strange as it may seem, such dreams are often mandatory, and in such cases they are literally fulfilled. Some cases of cure are, indeed, so wonderful as to seem miraculous, and these are invariably taken to be the result of sudden and direct intervention on the part of the goddess, who is believed to effect an instantaneous cure whenever

she pleases to do so, simply "by passing her hand over the body of the sufferer." Hence a deeply emotional woman sometimes professes to see an airy hand moving to and fro over the bed of an unconscious victim and bringing him back to life and health.

It is this popular belief identifying the goddess Sitala with small-pox, that is responsible for the practice, prevailing in some parts, of not burning the bodies of those who die of this disease. It is also an expansion or corollary of this same belief that the goddess Sitala has been made the presiding deity of cholera, and, since 1897, of the Plague as well. There are very few brick-built temples raised to this goddess, and those that do exist are unimposing structures, low, narrow, and with no architectural pretensions of any kind. Her shrines are generally found outside the bounds of a village, mostly under *Neem* trees, or in shady groves where a mud platform and a tall bamboo, bearing a blood-red banner fluttering forlornly in the wind, mark the sacred spot where the village women gather together during seasons of sickness to offer flower and grain to appease the wrath of the angry goddess.

The name 'Sitala' literally means 'cool,' although in her character she is anything but cool. She is believed to delight in blood; and hence a

goat-sacrifice is often vowed to her by her worshippers. Hence, too, she is represented as wearing blood-red garments, although the complexion of her face is a pale yellow. She carries a bundle of reeds in her hand and she is mounted on an ass. The ass is the *vahan* of Sitala, but strangely enough, this animal is despised as an unclean beast, and the higher castes of Hindus disdain even to touch it, and feel it necessary to purify themselves by a bath if accidentally they come in contact with an ass. Probably the reason why the donkey is called the *vahan* of the goddess of small-pox, is that the milk of a she-ass is, by Hindu physicians, declared to be a specific remedy in cases of small-pox.

Sitala is known by other names as well, such as Devi, Bhawani, and Mata. The last name means simply a 'mother,'—an affectionate name given probably to win her favour, or alluding to her being a manifestation of Shakti, the divine mother of the universe. Every town and village of Northern India has its local 'Mother,' who is worshipped regularly twice every week, generally on Mondays and Fridays; and on these days there is always a little local *mela* or fair at every local shrine. The local Mother of Allahabad is the goddess Alopi, a name literally meaning 'the one that never disappears.' She is not represented by an image, but only by a stone slab on which the offerings of

worshippers are made. One remarkable feature of the worship of Alopi—and this is perhaps true of other local Mothers—is that Mohamedan *bhistis* or water-carriers are employed by Hindu worshippers to pour down a *mashak* of water in front of the shrine, when the *puja* is over. This pouring of water on the ground signifies the "cooling of the earth," the "cooling" being probably an emblematic reference to the name of the goddess Sitala, and also a token of her vouchsafing domestic peace and quiet.

The offerings special to Sitala are betel leaves, flowers, preferably of a red colour, and some varieties of cooked food, such as *poori* and *gulgula*, or only parched grain. It is another distinctive peculiarity of the worship of Sitala, that *cooked* food forms part of the offerings at a temple. The rule is that cooked food, carried out of the bounds of the *chowka* or cooking place, becomes *ipso facto* unclean, and unfit even for respectable mortal taste; hence no cooked food is ever offered in worship at any public temple, the priests alone having the privilege of supplying the deity with his usual meals at the usual hours, during which the public are shut out from the temple and visits are disallowed. But in the case of the goddess Sitala this rule, which is rigidly enforced in all other cases, is relaxed, and cooked food from the hands of all castes is freely

allowed to come within the very sanctum of the temple. Sometimes the food is cooked at home and brought to the temple and offered ; sometimes it is cooked on the grounds adjoining the temple and offered to the goddess and then partaken by her worshippers ; but this latter course is adopted only in cases of a special vow to that effect.

It must be pointed out that Mother-worship in these rather gross forms is confined exclusively to the female folk of the lower castes. These Mother-goddesses are the most popular local deities of Northern India, in the sense that they are publicly worshipped oftener than any other gods or goddesses. The only other deity that approaches them in popularity is the goddess Shashthi, the goddess of maternity and offspring, whose sacred day is the sixth day of the bright half of practically every month. Their immense popularity is probably due to the fact that they are goddesses, manifestations of the divine mother. When the human mother is venerated as a kind of divine personage, the reverence due to the divine mother must be proportionately greater. Another reason probably is that they are believed to be easily propitiated by prayers, vows, and offerings. But the real reason is that they are believed to be *jaggrata*, 'wide-awake,' ready at all times to listen to human prayer, and not like the Epicurean gods lying beside their nectar,

"careless of mankind," or smiling in secret, looking over wasted lands—

> "Blight and famine, plague and earthquake, roaring deeps, and fiery sands,
> Clanging fights, and flaming towns, and sinking ships, and praying hands."

VII

Rama Navami

Rama Navami is the birthday of Rama, who is accepted by Hindus of all classes, castes, and creeds as a divine incarnation who appeared on earth in the *Treta* age, the second of the four æons into which human Time is divided. According to Hindu belief, an incarnation arises whenever the world begins to groan under the weight of an accumulated load of sin, and then the All-preserver Vishnu feels constrained by a self-made law to put some part of his divine essence into human form, to save the human species from annihilation. Now, we learn from the *Ramayana* that just before the advent of Rama, a race of Rakshasas had overrun the land and were committing unbearable outrages in every populated tract of the country. They even carried death and dismay into the forest tracts of India, and molested poor anchorites, disturbing them in their devotions, pelting them with abuse, and making their lives, wherever spared, intolerable. The age, too, had become thoroughly corrupt; distinctions of right and wrong were but faintly recognised;

the wicked throve and prospered; those who honoured neither their parents nor their gods lived in the enjoyment of fortune. The Earth was dismayed at this piteous persecution of everything high and holy; and the mythological account of the birth of Rama says that the Earth-mother, feeling helpless, assumed the shape of a cow, and with tears made her plaint to the gods. The gods sympathised with her distress, and asked her to go to Brahma, the Creator, for redress. But Brahma sent her on to Vishnu, and the lesser gods joined their own entreaties praying for speedy relief. Vishnu heard their prayer, and acknowledged it by means of a divine voice announcing his will thus:—"I will myself descend from heaven, with my eternal spouse, and lift the whole of earth's burden." At this assurance, the Earth forgot her woes, and the gods danced for very joy. They too hastened down to the world and took shape as monkeys, awaiting the divine advent with bounding joy.

Meanwhile, Dasaratha had succeeded to the throne of Kosala, a powerful ancient kingdom of Northern India, situated in what is now called Oudh. He was a scion of the illustrious solar race who claim descent from the Sungod. The poet of the *Ramayana* has eulogised the virtues of this monarch in a style heavily laden with oriental ornament; but even after making due allowance for poetic

exaggeration, we must admit that, historically, he was a most benevolent ruler, a father to his people a sage and saint in private life, a defender of the faith. He had three queens, Kausalya being the eldest ; and the queens too were as pious and godly as the king. But at heart this great king was an unhappy man, because he had no issue by any of the three queens. One day the king repaired to Saint Vasishtha, his *guru* or religious preceptor, and spoke of the sorrow he felt at his continued childlessness. The saint advised him to perform a sacrifice, such as was prescribed in the holy books for the birth of a son. In the midst of the sacrifice the Fire-god appeared in person, with an offering in his hand, saying to Dasaratha, " Take this oblation, O king, and divide it among thy queens, in such proportions as thou pleasest." When the Fire-god vanished, the king sent for his wives, and distributed the sacred oblation among them, giving a half-share to Kausalya, the senior queen, and dividing the other half equally between the other two. Thereafter were born the four brothers, Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata, and Satrughna, of whom the first, Rama, was the son of the eldest queen, and so was recognised as the eldest of the princes.

" Full of delight was all creation, animate and inanimate, when Rama was born. On the ninth

day of the holy month of *Chaitra*, in the bright lunar fortnight, under Abhijit, his favourite constellation, on a seasonable day, neither hot nor cold, a holy time of rest for all, with fragrant breezes blowing, amidst the delight of gods and rapture of the saints, while the woods were full of blossoms and every river flowed with nectar, God took birth as a man, in a body formed at his own will—he who is beyond all form, or quality, or perception of the senses." It is in these words that the *Ramayana* (Book I, *Bal-Kanda*) describes the birth of Rama, and it is the birth of Rama that is commemorated in all parts of India by this annual festival, called the Rama Navami.

The subsequent history of Rama is recorded in the same work which furnishes us with an account of his divine birth. The *Ramayana* is, as its name fitly denotes, a metrical biography of Rama, and not merely an immortal epic ; it records every event of his life, down to the minutest detail ; it reports every utterance of his lips with the strictest faithfulness ; it celebrates every exploit of his arms in strains of poetry that frequently soar above the sublimest heights ever attained by uninspired human composition. The seven Books, the five hundred cantos, the twenty-four thousand couplets that belong to this monumental piece of writing, have but a single theme—Rama ;

the three thousand years during which this colossal literary fabric has stood, have not touched a single leaf of it with the fading hue of decay. The *Ramayana* still forms the basis of a living faith—a faith deep-drawn from the storied past, infused with fresh vigour at many an intermediate stage, and palpitating with the breath of life as warmly to-day as it did through the centuries left behind. This is because the ideals of character depicted in the story are the ideals that have ever appealed most forcibly to the mind of the Hindu people, who prize the quiet domestic virtues far more deeply than those uproarious qualities that are often so proudly paraded before the public. The filial obedience of Rama, the brotherly faith of Lakshmana, the sincere self-sacrifice of Bharata, the wifely devotion of Sita, the unswerving loyalty and allegiance of Hanumana,—these are ideals of imperishable worth penetrating deeply into the minds of a people that have retained the primitive purity of human virtues, unalloyed by the later virtues of a later civilisation.

Every event of Rama's life is fraught with an undying lesson for the pious Hindu. Rama is a born prince, and then a king ; but in their adoration for his character his worshippers forget his kingly position ; they take every deed of his as done with the express object of holding up a model before

their eyes; they interpret every word of his in the light of a gospel; and in their eagerness to do honour to the hero they have accorded a due measure of honour to the hero-worshipper as well —the "saint" Valmiki, the original author of the *Ramayana*, and even to *his* worshippers, those who have translated the Sanskrit epic into the different vernaculars of India. Men like Tulsi Das, whose translation is the great classic of Hindi literature, are not believed to have been ordinary mortals, but men divinely favoured, the elect of God. For the popular belief with regard to such religious writings is akin to the Miltonic conception of the vocation of a poet,—that no one can dare to write on such sacred themes unless he is especially inspired by "that Eternal Spirit who can enrich with all utterance and knowledge, and sends out his seraphim with the hallowed fire of his altar to touch and purify the life of whom he pleases."

The importance of the Rama Navami festival cannot be properly gauged unless we take account of the veneration with which the Hindus regard the *Ramayana*—a veneration which is only a reflection of that devouter sentiment with which they regard the very name of Rama. One curious practice, common among ignorant Hindus, will illustrate the blind fervour of faith which they repose even in the bare name of Rama. They write the simple

name of Rama, or get it written by a priest, a thousand or a hundred thousand times on a sheet of paper, which they afterwards cut up into as many bits, and insert each bit into a little ball or globule of kneaded flour, and then cast these stuffed globules into the waters of the Ganges or some other holy stream, to feed fish. This is sometimes done only as an act of piety, but more often it is done in fulfilment of a vow made in some season of difficulty or distress. A sort of magic virtue is also sometimes attached to the name of Rama, which is believed to scare away evil spirits, more effectively than any exorcism. There is no name more constantly on Hindu lips; even the common form of salutation among the uneducated consists in repeating the name of Rama twice in succession, and the salutation is returned by a fresh repetition of the same name. The same name serves as a pious invocation at the commencement of every work, and at its close the name is again uttered in token of pious thanksgiving. An instinct of reverence for this name is inherited at the very birth of a Hindu infant, and the instinct grows stronger at each step of its life onward. The story of Rama is one of the earliest tales that the Hindu child hears in the nursery; when he goes to school he reads the same story for himself in some popular version of the great epic; in youth, the narrative of Rama's

exploits stimulates his imagination and elicits his admiration; in manhood, he ponders reflectively over the great truths that he draws from that Scripture; in age, he derives spiritual consolation from telling the name of Rama on his beads; and last, when his lips are sealed by the hand of death, it is the same holy name again that is whispered into his ears and chanted in a chorus as his body is carried to the river-bank for cremation.

VIII

Dasahara, or Ganga Puja

Dasahara or Ganga Puja must be at once distinguished from Dasahara or Durga Puja. The name Dasahara, as given to the last day of the Durga Puja festival, is a misnomer, arising probably from the fact that both festivals occur on the *tenth* day of the moon, the prefix *dasa* meaning 'ten.' But the two festivals whose names have become erroneously identical, have nothing in common, except this accidental resemblance of names. They occur in different seasons of the year, they commemorate different myths, they are held in honour of different deities.

The word 'Dasahara' is an abbreviation of the Sanskrit phrase *Dasa-bidha pap hara*, which means, 'the destroyer of ten kinds of sin.' It is a name given to the birth-day of the goddess Ganga, because this sacred stream is believed to be a destroyer of human sins. The "birth-day" of the goddess Ganga means the day on which the river, which was originally a celestial stream, descended from her heavenly channel to flow on the face of the earth. This

sacred day is the tenth day of the moonlit half of *Jaistha* (May-June), which is, accordingly, one of the greatest bathing-days of the Hindu calendar.

There are several legends describing how the river Ganga first came down to earth. There was once a king of Ayodhya, named Sagara, who had two wives but no issue. Childlessness being one of the greatest curses that can ever fall to the lot of a Hindu, Sagara performed many a penance and offered many a sacrifice with the desire of begetting offspring. Thereafter, one of the queens became the mother of a single son, named Ashwamanjan, and the other bore so many as sixty thousand. In his joy the king proceeded to celebrate the *Ashwamedha* ceremony, or the Horse-sacrifice, in order to declare his suzerainty over the neighbouring kingdoms and principalities. But Indra, king of Heaven, stole the sacred steed out of jealousy, and caused a most inauspicious interruption to the holy ceremony. The sixty thousand princes proceeded in all directions to search the stolen steed, but found no trace of it on the surface of the earth. They therefore proceeded to dig down below the surface, each prince digging for the depth of a league, until they should reach the centre of the globe. But before they could accomplish their task, they were consumed by a fire by the sage Kapila, whom they found sitting in a deep underground cell, with his eyes closed

in meditation, and with the stolen steed standing behind him. Without making any inquiries as to how the steed had come to be there, the princes accused Kapila of theft. The sage, who did not know anything of the theft, fell into a rage at this unjust accusation, and burnt the entire company of princes to ashes with the fire of his wrath. King Sagara was overwhelmed with grief at the loss of his sixty thousand sons, and in his distress he went about from one sage to another, seeking advice and consolation. He was told that his sixty thousand sons would come to life again and ascend to heaven, provided the river Ganga could be brought down to flow on earth. Bhagiratha, his grandson—the son of his surviving heir, Ashwamanjan—thereupon undertook a course of prayer and penance with the object of bringing down the goddess Ganga ; and his prayers were at last granted by Brahma, who directed the celestial stream to descend from the Himalayas. The descent of the river was so tremendous in force that the earth would have been swept away had not the god Shiva broken the fall of the waters by allowing them to flow through his matted locks, which caused the river to split into seven streams. For this service, Shiva has received the title of 'Gangadhar,' or 'Upholder of the Ganges.' When the waters of the Ganges reached the ashes of the sixty thousand slain princes, their

spirits rose to heaven and were admitted to eternal bliss. But there was still one rude interruption to the peaceful course of the Ganges on earth. The sudden onrush of waters disturbed the sage Jahnu as he was performing a holy sacrifice, flooding the sacrificial site, wetting or drowning many of the sacrificial offerings, putting out the sacrificial fire. Jahnu thereupon drank up the whole stream by making an *achman* of her—*achman* being the sipping of holy water just before a religious rite. But the sage afterwards relented, and allowed the river to flow out of one of his ears ; hence the Ganges is also known by the name of Jahnavi, 'the daughter of Jahnu.'

Just as the name Dasahara, which properly applies to the birthday of the goddess Ganga, is given to the Vijaya Dasami by a popular confusion, in the same way, a similar chance resemblance of names has connected the little island (or rather eyot) of Sagara, situated at the mouth of the Ganges, and called ' Sagara ' no doubt on account of its proximity to the sea, with King Sagara, this legendary king of Ayodhya. This island is invested with great sanctity and is the seat of an annual pilgrimage on the day of Dasahara.

The legends that cluster round the person of the goddess Ganga are mostly illustrative of her wonderful power of cleansing a man from sin. The extreme

case of her exercising such power was that of Raja Trisanku, who had committed the three deadly sins of killing a cow, disobeying his father, and eating unhallowed meat. But even he was absolved from his sins by a bath in the Ganges. There was another sinful king, who might be Trisanku or some other, who had committed the inexpiable sins of murdering a Brahman, and marrying his own step-mother ; and he, too, was similarly saved from the effects of his sins. A bath in the Ganges is efficacious not only as a propitiation for past sin, but also for the purpose of gaining a store of spiritual merit that remains to one's credit through many births and serves to counteract the evil effect of other sins incurred in the same or other lives.

Some legends represent the goddess Ganga as the daughter of Himavat and Mena, and as the wife of King Santanu, a descendant of the illustrious King Bharata, son of the immortal Sakuntala. Santanu was, according to some legends, the father of Bhishma, the aged chief who fought as leader of the Kuru armies in the Mahabharata war. He was a king regarding whom it is said that " every decrepit man whom he touched with his hands became young again." He was also famed as *satya-badi*, 'the truth-teller,' and was remarkable for his devotion, charity, modesty, constancy, and resolution.

Every spot washed by the waters of the Ganges

is believed to be holy ground, and some of the holiest places of pilgrimage are situated on the banks of this river. Every inch of the fifteen hundred miles of her length is believed to be instinct with divinity ; her waters are credited not only with spiritual absolution from sin, but also with medicinal and hygienic properties, and modern chemistry has added to her ancient glories by declaring that her waters are an effective germicide. The temples that line her banks are countless in number, and fresh additions are made year after year. These temples are not raised in honour of the goddess herself, but belong to different deities ; the goddess Ganga is not worshipped in any temple reared by the hand of man, nor is she represented by any image of brass or stone ; her temple is her majestic home of waters, and her best image is the image of heaven she reflects on her broad bosom.

Like other gods and goddesses, Ganga has her own special priests, who are known as *Ganga-putras*, ' sons of the Ganges,' and these priests form a very exclusive fraternity, who are found in numbers wherever a place of pilgrimage is situated on the banks of this river. Many of them earn large incomes at each bathing season, and, season or no season, they always manage to make a living out of the daily gifts they receive from customary bathers.

Ganges water is needed daily for the everyday duties of a Hindu's life. It is required for the morning and evening worship; it is needed at the celebration of every domestic ceremony; it is indispensable for every purificatory rite; it is equally essential at the moment of death, when it is dropped on the lips of a dying person as a sort of viaticum. Even those who do not live in the neighbourhood of the Ganges take care to keep a bottle of its water for use on occasions of emergency. They either obtain a supply from a trader—for there is a regular trade carried on in despatching Ganges water in small bottles to all parts of India; or they carefully preserve the remnant of a supply they themselves or their friends had brought from some pilgrimage. When, however, Ganges water is not procurable by any means, any water, such as that from an ordinary well, can be sanctified by means of appropriate *mantras*; and this is actually done by most people living far from the Ganges, in the case of the water they use in their daily worship.

Many other Indian rivers are regarded as holy streams, the chief of these being the Jamuna, the Godavari, the Saraswati, the Narmada, the Indus, and the Kaveri. Of these, the Narmada is by some people regarded as equal in sanctity to the Ganges, if not superior. These people say that according to the *Bhavishya Purana* (a sacred book containing a

record of sibylline prophecies), the sanctity of the Ganges will cease, by flux of time, on a certain date during the *Kali Yuga* (the present age), whereas the sanctity of the Narmada is everlasting. This certain date is said to be "five thousand years from the commencement of the *Kali Yuga*." According to certain occult calculations, this date was put down as the year 1895 of the Christian era. About that time there was some commotion in religious circles over what they feared to be a national disaster. But twenty years have elapsed since that dreaded date, and the Ganges still retains her ancient sanctity without the slightest abatement.

One curious fact about the goddess Ganges is that the best of all the hymns ever composed in her honour, is said to have been written by a *Mohamedan* worshipper, named Darab Khan—a Bengali Mohamedan in all probability, for the above tradition is current only in Bengal.

IX

Nag Panchami

Nag Panchami, popularly called ' Guriya,' is the fifth day of the light half of *Sravana*, and occurs just about the middle of the rainy season, in July or August. It is a festival held in honour of the Nags or serpent-deities of Hindu mythology, who are fabled to have sprung from Kadru, one of the wives of the sage Kashyapa. It is very unlikely that this sage was the same who is well-known to have been the founder of a numerous sub-division of Brahmans ; but the ancient sages are sometimes credited with the strangest things. Be that as it may, this extraordinary lady is reputed to have become the mother of a thousand Nags, who afterwards became the progenitors of the whole serpent species. The Nags were not serpents themselves, but a race of beings partaking of both human and serpentine qualities, and yet in some respects superhuman. They were often very friendly to man, and sometimes they even condescended to choose human consorts, and to dwell with them under the same roof. These Nag demigods are believed to be

still in existence, living deep down below the earth's surface, in a region called 'Patala,' one tract of which is for that reason called 'Nag Loka' (the world of Nags). They evidently lead a civilised life, for they are represented as ruled by kings, the most renowned and supreme of whom is Sesha Nag, a thousand-crested monster who supports the "flat disc of the earth" upon his thousand heads, and whose coiled-up body forms the couch of Vishnu during his four months' spell of sleep within the bowels of the earth. The waking up of the god from sleep forms the occasion of a Hindu festival, called Devotthan Ekadashi.

Serpent worship, as the practical part of a human creed, is as old as the human race itself, and much research has been made into the subject of ophiolatry with a view to determining its exact origin. The only certain conclusion which scholars have arrived at seems to be that the real origin of this practice must ever remain uncertain. Some authorities are inclined to think that Snake-worship was the earliest form of religion prevalent among men, not only in India, but in every country in which snakes at all inspire the human heart with dread. The reason they give for this opinion is that primitive man, unarmed as he was with any efficient knowledge of medicine and surgery, naturally felt the greatest horror for "a mysterious

creeping creature, silent and stealthy in its movements, apparently quite unprovided with the most ordinary means of offence and defence, yet found to have at its command the most deadly of all known destructive weapons, and able to cause almost instantaneous death by merely pricking the skin of its adversary." Such seems at least to be the opinion of Sir Monier Williams. But, so far as his statement may be taken to apply to India, it is inapplicable in the case of the primitive Aryans of the Vedic period. For there is no mention, not even a significant hint, of serpent-worship anywhere in the Vedas. The Vedic deities are the powers of Nature, the four Elemental Beings, earth, water, fire and air, personified under various names and represented with various attributes. Serpent-worship must be taken to mark a stage later than the Vedic form of faith. Whether this later stage represents an advance or a decline in the life of the Hindu religion, is a point upon which it is impossible to arbitrate ; but it seems that veneration for snakes (not of course pushed to practical adoration) marks that stage in the development of the Hindu religion when it first became fully 'catholic,' tolerating all creeds, admitting all manner of doctrines, acknowledging all sorts of deities,—that form of Hinduism which still subsists, and which shelters under its protecting wings all shades of

human belief, rational and irrational, from the grossest form of fetishism to the sublimest monotheism.

Serpents are inseparably associated in all minds with fear; but there is some ground for believing that the worship of serpents did not wholly arise from fear. Serpent-worship, so far as it is not merely a popular superstition, enjoys some measure of scriptural sanction in addition to what impetus it derives from the instinct of fear. The common people of course are in their worship actuated by fear alone; but this is so not only in the case of serpent-deities, who are legitimate objects of fear to believers, non-believers and disbelievers alike, but even in the case of the most benignant gods. Others regard serpents as worthy of veneration, because the "great god" Shiva, who heads one of the most numerous cults among the Hindus, is represented as wearing a serpent round his neck, with many others dangling along his breast and back, or coiling gracefully around his waist, these serpents symbolising to the eye of faith the endless cycle of recurring years, the eternal revolution of ages, the never-ceasing whirl of atoms bringing on the perpetual dissolution and regeneration of the races of mankind and all else of life or matter that dwells on this planetary system. This is how serpent-worship has intertwined itself with Shaivism

and thus found favour among a numerous class of Hindus, literate as well as illiterate. It has also penetrated its way into Vaishnavism through a very dark channel, for Vaishnavites say that their chief god is in the habit of enjoying a four months' spell of sleep on the coiled-up body of Sesha Nag, deep down in the centre of the earth ; and blessed must this proud creature be to render this service to the great Preserver of the universe. At the same time, we cannot help believing that the worship of Nags is not absolutely unmixed with fear, even in the case of staunch Shaivas and enthusiastic Vaishnavas, if they have any idea of the formidable statistics of mortality by snakebite published in India every year.

It would be unnecessary to refer here in any detail to the part played by snakes in Indian folklore. There are well-known myths relating to snakes current in every village of India, and these stories are as popular among the younger folk as ghost stories. There was in one village a snake who used to present a Brahman with two gold pieces every night. There was another in another that kept guard over a buried treasure lying underneath such and such tree. There was a third that had a tongue of flame with which he set fire to whole fields, and sometimes his flaming tongue was seen shining through the darkness away on some lonely

heath scattered over with the bones of dead cattle. A fourth would bite a man to death one night and lick the poison back the next morning, on discovering that the man was innocent. A fifth had the power of changing his form mysteriously and of flying through the air with the same ease with which fishes swim in water. These wonderful stories are obviously fairy tales invented by some village genius to amuse village urchins, and also probably to set limits to their endless peregrinations through the village fields and groves, which are just the places most haunted by snakes on summer nights and throughout the rainy season. Not the least wonderful of these snake stories, but having a more realistic basis, are stories of snake-charmers or 'Ojhas,' as they are sometimes called, who effect miraculous cures of patients dying from the poison of snake-bite. These cures are effected sometimes merely by means of magic incantations, but sometimes by the magician's summoning to his presence the very snake that caused the bite, and compelling it, by appropriate spells, to suck back the poison from its victim's body through the puncture caused by the bite. Even at this day there are people in all parts of India who can cure cases of snake-bite without the use of a single drug, and without even making an incision into any part of the patient's skin. They do this only with

the aid of *mantras*, and as a labour of love ; they charge no fee, they accept no remuneration, they expect no recompense. For these *mantras* are generally learned from the lips of holy devotees who enjoin the practice of this healing art as a religious duty upon their disciples, so that if the latter should accept any repayment for such services, they fear to incur the displeasure of their preceptor, and lose the efficacy of those *mantras* into the bargain. Some cures are obtained by the use of herbs and roots, and every Hindu physician of the old school possesses a knowledge of these, and in simple cases effects successful cures without the assistance of any surgical appliances. There are others in which accessory aids supplement the magic of *mantras*. I remember to have witnessed a holy sage performing such cures long ago. A turban cloth was wetted and then twisted twofold or fourfold so as to make a sort of thick lash, and with this lash the palms of the patient's hands, the soles of his feet, and the crown of his head were struck, at first gently, and then more and more briskly, until, in severe cases, consciousness returned ; and then the man was lifted up to a sitting posture, and his back, too, was similarly treated with the lash, the strokes continuing in the case of all these parts of the body until the man began almost to cry for pain ; and then he was made to stand up and to suffer

another round of lashing; and finally, he was made to walk up and down, under support, for about half an hour, receiving at intervals a few strokes of the lash still. The whole cure, in bad cases, occupied a couple of hours. The only directions that were given to the patient's attendants, when the whole was finished, were that the man must not be allowed to eat or drink anything for at least twelve hours, and that he must on no account fall into sleep for the same length of time. Incantations were used at infrequent intervals during the lashing, but they were pronounced inaudibly, and all that the spectator saw or heard was the almost ceaseless lashing and an occasional breath forcibly blown out through the lips of the sage towards the patient, but not necessarily touching the patient's body.

Serpent-worship has not yet died out from India, and though there is reason to believe that at one time it was pretty common, the strange thing about it is that there are few or no temples dedicated to serpents anywhere in Northern India, except at Allahabad, where, in Daraganj, not far from the banks of the Ganges, there is a temple containing an actual stone image of a snake-god. This snake-god is Vasuki, a king of the Nags, whose sister, Manasa, is the only Nag deity worshipped in Bengal, —but not on the day of Nag Panchami, which is a festival unknown in that presidency. There is

another Nag temple in Allahabad, near the famous hermitage of Bharadwaja, in Colonelganj, but this temple is not so important as the Daraganj one, and is probably only a spurious imitation of the latter.

Nag Panchami is a festival confined only to the United Provinces. The religious element in the festival has been crushed almost out of existence under a weight of secular forms and observances; and Nag Panchami is now chiefly celebrated by young men and women enjoying the pleasure of a swing or *jhoola*, the craze for which is so strong in places like Ayodhya and Mirzapur, that there is in those towns a regular "jhoola season," commencing on the day of Nag Panchami and continuing up to the day of the next full moon,—that is, lasting for eleven days. In some districts, the customary practice on the day of this festival is for the head of the family to take an early bath in the morning, and to paint on the wall of his bedroom a couple of rude pictures representing the Nag deities, and then make offerings to Brahmans. This is supposed to guard the whole house from the danger of snake bite during the year. The women-folk of some villages sometimes make a snake-like line, by scattering flour all round the house, drawing a sort of magic circle within which no snake is believed to have power to enter. The characteristic food of

the day is gram soaked in water, which is called *ghughri*, and is eaten sometimes raw and sometimes fried in mustard oil or ghee. 'Ghughri' is also presented to Brahmans and given to menials.

The popular name of the festival, 'Guriya,' alludes to one of the ceremonies performed on this day, just at about sunset. A number of rude dolls, made of rag and dyed in a solution of turmeric, are thrown down into a pit, and the village lads beat these with sticks amid much boyish merriment. This ceremony is probably emblematic of the destruction of the whole brood of serpents. The term 'Guriya,' however, only means a 'doll,' and it is this custom of 'beating' dolls with sticks on the evening of Nag Panchami that has given its popular name to the festival, *Guriyon ka mela*.

X

Raksha Bandhan

Raksha Bandhan, popularly called 'Salono,' is the full moon of *Sravana*, and thus occurs exactly ten days after Nag Panchami. 'Salono' is a corruption of the Persian term *Sal-i-Nau*, 'the new year;' and it is a name given to the full moon of *Sravana*, because it marks the point of transition between the old and the new *Fasli* or agricultural year. The classic name, Raksha Bandhan, is derived from the principal ceremony of the day—the tying of an ornamental silk cord or cotton string round the wrist. This silk or cotton cord is called the 'Raksha,' because it is intended to serve as an amulet guarding the wearer from all kinds of evil. These sacred strings are usually dyed in yellow, the most auspicious colour among the Hindus; but sometimes they are blazoned with a variety of gaudy colours and ornamented with tassels, to suit individual tastes. Usually, it is the family priest who, after consecrating a bundle of Rakshas by offering them in worship to Vishnu, ties one round the wrist of every member of his client's family, more particularly the

children and the principal earning members. But in Brahman households the priest's function is often performed by the head of the family who ties the Raksha round the wrists of his dependants with appropriate blessings. Among some Brahman communities, notably those of Gujarat, Raksha Bandhan is a festival in which the active part of the celebration is performed by females, who tie the sacred amulet round the wrists of their brothers and give them or receive from them presents of cash and of clothing, according as the brothers are younger or older than themselves,—a ceremony analogous to Bhratri Dwitiya.

According to a popular notion, Raksha Bandhan is a distinctively Brahman festival, the privilege of observing it being confined to Brahmans alone. This notion is based on an ancient saying, which enumerates four chief denominational festivals, corresponding to the four chief divisions of the Hindu race. Thus Raksha Bandhan is the festival for Brahmans, Durga Puja for Kshattriyas, Diwali for Vaishyas, and Holi for Sudras. The above classification is no doubt a very ingenious one, founded as it is on a superficial similarity between the essential nature of a festival and the distinctive character of the caste whose special privilege it is declared to be. Thus, Raksha Bandhan is unquestionably a Brahman festival, inasmuch as Brahmans alone have

the privilege and the power of conferring the protection of the ' Raksha ' upon such members of the other castes as they might choose to pick out for this special favour. Raksha Bandhan also imposes some obligations on Brahmans, in that it enjoins upon them to change their sacred thread on this sacred day. The Durga Puja is, similarly, a pre-eminently Kshattriya festival, because the goddess Durga is the goddess of Victory, and also because the martial pageantry of the Ram Lila is fitted to appeal to the martial spirit of the warrior caste. In the same way Diwali has special claims on the reverence of the Vaishyas, because they constitute the mercantile community among the Hindus, and therefore, represent the wealthy classes who would naturally be interested in the worship of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity. Lastly, Holi may be fitly relegated to the last rank of a Sudra festival, in consequence of the vulgar practice of singing obscene songs in public streets. So far the classification of the festivals according to castes may be justified by some kind of principle. But in practice no such classification is acknowledged, except in the case of Raksha Bandhan alone, the exclusively Brahman character of which has not been infringed by trespassers from the lower castes.

Whatever authority there might be for the

notion that Raksha Bandhan was originally a distinctively Brahman festival, and whatever the original mode of celebrating it might have been, there is no doubt that the present fashion of observing it is little short of a regular system of levying blackmail. It is treated as a great harvest-day by Brahmans of the priestly order, and the mendicant class, who wander about the town all day, from sunrise to sunset, carrying a bundle of 'Rakshas,' visiting the houses of the rich and well-to-do, tying a 'Raksha' round their wrist, wherever they can, hanging on until they have received a cash present, and then departing to repeat the same performance in as many more places as they can go to. If they happen to meet any of their clientele on the road, they waylay him there, and insist on tying a 'Raksha' round his wrist, however unwilling he may be to be manacled in this manner in the public streets. The merest chance of an acquaintance, the most casual contact, the remotest connection is enough to establish a bond of relationship between you and a Brahman of this class, entitling him to the privilege of tying a 'Raksha' round your arm, wherever he may happen to catch you on this day. Discharged cooks, whether of your own house or of that of a friend at whose place you have once dined; post and telegraph peons, who happen to be Brahmans by caste;

Brahman constables attached to the Police station under whose jurisdiction you live now or ever lived in the past; nephews of a former Chaukidar or Chaprasi of your office; not to speak of *all* Brahman members of your present domestic and office establishment,—all these have a strong claim upon your wrist and your purse, a claim that they exercise not only by right of their Brahmanical blood, but also on the strength of their or their ancestors' present or past connection with you, in your private or public capacity, or with one of your own ancestors, in *his* private or public capacity. I once ordered a pair of boots from a well-known local firm of shoemakers. This was in the month of September, some six weeks after the Raksha Bandhan festival. The boots were delivered at my house by a Chaprasi of the firm. Next year, eleven months after the boots were made, and when I had half worn them out, the same Chaprasi—or at any rate, he claimed to be the same, and I think truly, else he would never have known that I once committed the indiscretion of ordering a pair of boots to be delivered at my house by a Chaprasi—well, the same Chaprasi presented himself before me, with a most amiable smile on his lips, and offered to tie a 'Raksha' round my wrist. He felt a little surprised at my bad memory when I stared blankly at his face; and then he proceeded to remind me of the

happy circumstances under which I first made his acquaintance. Neither of us had time that day to make our acquaintance any deeper, and so I bade good-bye to my friend with a small cash present, which, whatever pocket it might go into, was, in so far as it went out of mine, so much added to the original cost of my boots.

The fees which form the customary receipts of Brahmans on this day are always paid in cash, ranging from a pie to a rupee, according to the means of the giver or the rank of the receiver. The act of tying the 'Raksha' is always accompanied by a classical benediction, which, in the mouth of illiterate Brahmans, is often unintelligibly mispronounced, and which in its correct form runs as follows :—

येन बद्धो बली राजा दानवेन्द्रो महाबलः ।
तेन त्वां प्रतिबध्नामि रक्षेमाचल माचलः ॥ १ ॥

The meaning of this stereotyped blessing is—"Thus I tie the 'Raksha' round your wrist,—the same which bound the arms of the mighty Bali, king of the Danavas. May the protection afforded by it be eternal!"

The reference in the foregoing formula to Raja Bali would appear to give to Raksha Bandhan a most ancient origin, the exact date of which cannot now be determined; but probably the name of this legendary king is intended to serve no other

purpose than that of poetic similitude. The story of Bali is one of the most popular tales of Indian mythology, and it is adverted to or quoted in full by writers of *Puranas* to explain or illustrate many a point of social usage or religious observance. There is nothing in the old books to show that the practice of tying a sacred thread round the wrist on this particular day of the year originated in the time of Raja Bali, unless it is assumed that every form of charity to Brahmans first arose in the reign of that super-charitable monarch. For Hindu poets have represented Bali as a king of boundless benevolence, who by his lavish gifts, bestowed with a heedless profusion without a parallel even in India, has left behind him a name which Brahmans at least, who benefited most largely from his charities, will not willingly let die. Bali was not an Aryan king, but belonged to the inferior race of 'Danavas,' who were sometimes regarded as lower even than human beings, as when the 'Danava' race was contrasted with the 'Manava' or the human race. But owing to his generosity his name is gratefully cherished as one of the greatest benefactors of ancient times. Bali was a man of great piety and devotion, and with the aid of these he asserted his superiority over Indra himself, King of the heavens, and extended his sway over the whole of infinite space, over each of the "three

worlds,"—" the upper, nether, and surrounding air." Thereupon the gods, who were thus dispossessed of their realms, appealed to Vishnu for redress. Vishnu listened to their appeal, and infused a portion of his essence into the body of a dwarf, and appeared on earth as the Vamana Avatara, or the Dwarf Incarnation. Now Raja Bali was in the habit of giving away anything to any one who came to ask for it,—a form of charity which is still considered the highest; and Vishnu, knowing that the Raja had bound himself by such a vow, appeared before the king in the shape of a dwarf, and begged as much land as he could step in three paces. The king thought it was quite a trifling gift that the dwarf had solicited—three steps of ground, measured out by the tallest man, was not at all a considerable gift for any king, much less, when measured out by a little dwarf. Bali of course granted the gift, but felt rather amused at this insignificant petition which came with such a contrast after the munificent gifts to which he had become accustomed. Just as his boon was granted, the dwarf swelled himself into a giant's bulk and stature, and in two mighty strides stepped across the whole of heaven and earth, and then asked Bali in what region he was to find the third step of ground that he had been promised. Bali replied, "I have no more land to give than you have legs

Chitra Bhanu, Chitrangada. Lastly, there is a similarity in the dates of the two festivals ; it is a *fourteenth* day of the moon in each case, only that the Shivaratri falls in the dark fortnight, the Ananta in the moonlit half ; one other minor difference is, that the former occurs in spring, the latter in autumn. Such a mass of resemblance must be more than mere coincidence ; one appears to be a mere imitation of the other. Probably what happened is this. A certain bard in a certain age took it into his head to smuggle into the *Mahabharata* a legend relating to the Shivaratri vow. The author of this interpolation was probably a follower of Shiva, and to popularize his favourite god he inserted an account of him into the great epic, just when the latter had begun to win universal popularity. Such a place of honour accorded to Shiva was probably galling to some equally zealous Vaishnava bard, who, in his anxiety not to be beaten in piety by a Shaiva, concocted a festival of his own creed similar to the Shivaratri, and called it by a similar name (for another name of Shivaratri is ' Shiva Chaturdashi '), fixed it on a similar date, gave it a similar origin, and found for it a similar place of honour in the pages of the same immortal epic, putting it into the mouth of the same aged chieftain (Bhishma) through whose lips the rival festival of Shiva had first been published to the

Hindu world. One can easily fancy this clever Vaishnava bard saying to himself—" Is Vishnu the Preserver to be beaten by Shiva the Destroyer ? No ; if Shiva has his Shiva Chaturdashi, Vishnu shall have his Ananta Chaturdashi ; if Shiva receives his yearly homage in spring, Vishnu shall have it in autumn ; if Shiva's *vrata* was first promulgated by king Chitra Bhanu of the lunar race, Vishnu's worship shall also have royal sanction from a king of the same dynasty, and a queen too, and the king shall be one bearing nearly the same name—we shall call him Chitrangada, and give to his queen the name of Chitra Rekha ; and if Shiva's holy fast is worthy of commemoration in scripture, I will not be backward in finding for Vishnu's holier fast a place in the very same chapter and verse."

This is probably the correct origin of the Ananta fast. There can be no doubt that if we believe one to be modelled after the other, we must take Shivaratri to be the original and Ananta the copy, because, historically, Vaishnavism is a later phase of the Hindu religion than Shaivism. There is one other possibility—that both accounts may have been evolved out of the same head and inserted by the same hand in their present place. For the *Mahabharata*, in its present form, is not the work of a single author, but a work that " went on growing with the growth of centuries ; " and as the late Mr.

R. C. Dutt says, "every generation of poets had something to add ; every distant nation in Northern India was anxious to interpolate some account of its deeds in the old record of the international war ; every preacher of a new creed desired to have in the old Epic some sanction for the new truths he inculcated."

The customary observances connected with the Ananta festival are of the simplest kind, consisting chiefly in wearing on the arm, just above the elbow joint, a holy thread, usually dyed in yellow, and made of cotton or silk yarn twisted ornamentally into fourteen knots—the fourteen being emblematic of the fourteenth day of the moon on which the festival is held. This holy thread, which is also called Ananta, is, previous to wearing, duly consecrated by offerings of *tulasi* leaves (*tulasi* or holy Basil being a plant sacred to Vishnu, and being itself worshipped as a deity), offerings of flowers and libations of Ganges water, made to the accompaniment of proper *mantras*. In the case of females (for females are not excluded from this holy fast, or from the Shivaratri either), the holy thread is tied round the left arm, whereas in the case of males it is fastened round the right arm. The fast observed on this day is not a total fast ; the only restriction that is made in the matter of food is that salt is absolutely forbidden, but grain food is not

disallowed. In this respect the Ananta fast is far less rigid than its rival Shivaratri, and this is because it is a Vaishnava fast. For the Vaishnavas discountenance the practice of those hard austerities that the Shaivas regard as the only path to salvation. Vermicelli boiled in milk and sugar is held to be the special dish on the day of the Ananta festival. Of course, only one meal is taken during the day, shortly after noon, and this is first offered to the god of the day and then partaken by the members of the family as *prasad* (or sacred remnant of any food which is believed to have been first tasted by a god),—by those members who are keeping the fast as well as by those who are not. Orthodox Vaishnavas keep the Ananta thread on for a whole year, that is, till the next season, when they discard the old one and put on a new.

The *Mahabharata* legend giving the origin of the Ananta festival runs as follows :—There was, in the Dwapara age, a king named Chitrangada, of the lunar race, who was unequalled in piety, save by his wife, Chitra Rekha. The king and queen once received a direct commandment from Vishnu to observe the Ananta *vrata*. Straight the king ordered a magnificent temple to be raised to Vishnu, and when the building was completed, he cleared it with his own hands, and placed an image of the god therein, and had the shrine and idol both duly

consecrated. He bestowed large sums in charity upon the poor, fed Brahmans, and gave a banquet to his friends, in honour of the happy ceremony. When the day of Ananta Chaturdashi came round, he had it proclaimed by beat of drum throughout his territories that all his subjects, of whatsoever caste or creed they might be, should observe the Ananta *vrata* on pain of severe punishment. The effect of this peremptory edict was that all his subjects were in a mass freed from the fetters of sin and admitted to the abodes of the blessed after their death, turn by turn; so that these people became as sinless in the Dwapara age as the people of the *Satya yuga*, the golden age, had been. Such sinlessness was considered by Dwapara—the Spirit of the Age—to be contrary to the laws laid down by Brahma the Creator, who had willed that not more than one in a thousand should, in the Dwapara age, attain the sanctity of a saint; whereas the actual proportion of saintliness in the population was, in Chitrangada's time, cent per cent,—an extraordinary figure indeed, thought Dwapara; and on inquiry into the cause of this unnatural phenomenon, he found out that it was due to the endeavours of king Chitrangada in enforcing observance of the Ananta vow by a compulsory edict. So Dwapara revolved in his mind a scheme whereby he thought of frustrating the pious efforts of the king, and of restoring the laws of the

Creator to operation. He summoned Vishwakarma, the sculptor of the gods, and said unto him: "Make me the image of a maiden of such beauty that she may indeed be peerless among earthly creatures." Vishwakarma at once complied with the wishes of Dwapara, and made a maiden of peerless beauty, whom he named Mohini ('the captivating one'); and when Mohini, after being endowed with life by the Creator, presented herself before Dwapara, the latter asked her to go down to the world of mortals, take her stand on Mount Dibya, and there hold Raja Chitrangada in remembrance, and, when she saw him, dissuade him from observing the Ananta *vrata*, not by threat or persuasion, but by cunning stratagem. The maiden did as she had been commanded. As the fates had pre-ordained, Chitrangada happened just then to be on a visit to the same mountain, in the course of a hunting expedition. Seeing a lovely maiden on the top of the hill, the Raja was captivated by her beauty, and he stepped up to her and said, "Who are you, fair maiden, and of what high lineage? Where is your home? Tell me truly, O chaste one. Your beauty is simply ravishing; it is fit to win the heart of Indra and the other gods. But let me first introduce myself.—My name is Chitrangada, and I am a king of the lunar dynasty. My heart has been filled with love for you. I pray you, do consent to be my beloved queen."

The maiden replied, "I have no father, no mother, being self-created, and this same mountain is my lonely home. My name is Mohini, and I am willing to offer my hand to you,—but on one condition, namely, that you make a solemn promise always to do whatever I tell you, and never to say me nay, even if the three worlds were in jeopardy."

The Raja made a solemn promise to that effect without a moment's delay, and the maiden then gladly consented to be his queen. The same night the Raja was wedded to this maiden on the hill-top by the ancient priest of the lunar kings, named Kankayan. Next day the king brought his newly-wedded wife to his palace, and made her his chief or senior queen. Days passed on in happiness, and when the Ananta season came round in due course, the king and his old queen, Chitra Rekha, kept their usual fast, and observed the yearly rite in the customary style, by making gifts of land and kine to Brahmans, and doles of grain and cash to the poor. Suddenly it flashed upon the mind of Mohini that she had been specially commissioned—*created*, in fact—to cause a violation of the king's observance of the Ananta fast, and she at once approached the Raja and said to him, "Why are you keeping a fast to-day? What is the good of performing such an austere form of penance? Let me ask you to renounce it, and to take your meal

in the usual way, for, I tell you, the greatest sin is to perpetuate a sin."

These words fell upon the Raja like a bolt from the blue ; he was first struck aghast at the blasphemy, and then fell into a rage, his eyes flaming with wrath and his lips quivering with emotion. But he exercised his wonted self-control, and regaining his coolness he replied, "You women are a simple-minded race, not gifted with any capacity to understand these occult truths. This is the Ananta *Vrata*, famous all over the world, observed by high and low alike,—and do you ask me to violate it? Well, women are an ignorant herd, rarely possessed of reason, and I do not know how to convince you of the rightness and wrongness of things. By observing this holy fast, all trace of sorrow and sin vanishes for ever, and the bliss of heaven becomes assured. Now listen to the story of my life in my previous birth, so that you might know why I have undertaken a vow to keep this fast every year. In my former birth I was a Sudra, addicted to vice, hardened in sin, a shameless villain, a confirmed drunkard, a habitual slayer of beasts and birds. My evil life led my brethren to turn me out of their fold. In a fit of rage I betook myself to a dark forest where I soon began to die of hunger and thirst. Suddenly I came upon a temple dedicated to Vishnu, within which I sought shelter for the

night and lay down on the floor fatigued and famished. It so happened that the day was the day of Ananta Chaturdashi, which I spent in voluntary abstinence from food and drink. Next morning a much more cruel fate awaited me: a serpent bit me in the leg and I died. Immediately after, two dark-robed demons came from Yama, king of the dead, and caught my soul in a tight noose; but just then two beaming angels, sent down by Vishnu, appeared on the spot, and seated me in an aerial car and bore me to heaven. There in the celestial region of Vishnu did I dwell for two hundred thousand years, at the end of which I was translated to the higher heaven of Brahma, where I resided for another long term, after which I took human shape again and was born a king, the king that I now am. All this reward I gained in return for my having observed the Ananta *Vrata*, casually, once. Now tell me if I can ever give it up, and whether I should. Never utter such an impious wish again."

Mohini rejoined, "O Raja, you made a solemn promise to me that you would always do as I bade you. I shall henceforth know you to be a liar. You know there is nothing more sinful than falsehood."

The Raja felt very much ashamed and found himself fixed on the horns of a dilemma. At last he

replied, " Lady, it shall never be my lot to break an ancient vow, or to prove false to my own word. I shall much rather give up my life."

So saying the Raja summoned his eldest son, and making over the sceptre of sovereignty to him, said, " I am going to sacrifice my life at the altar of Truth. The palace, the throne, the kingdom are all yours now. Rule justly, reverence the gods, and pay due honour to Brahmans."

With these words the king placed himself in a posture of deep meditation (*yoga*) and passed away into eternal bliss. After his death, a proclamation was made throughout his territories to the effect that " no man should make a promise to his wife."

XIII

Mahalaya Amavasya

Amavasya is the last day of the dark fortnight of a lunar month, and is in every season considered by the Hindus to be a day especially set apart for the performance of religious ceremonies in honour of the spirits of departed ancestors. Of all Amavasyas, the one that is universally observed as the chief day for the worship of the dead, is Mahalaya, the fifteenth or last day of the moonless fortnight of the month of *Kuar* or *Aswin* (September-October). The whole of the fortnight preceding Mahalaya is collectively called the Pitri Paksha, or the fortnight sacred to the memory of departed ancestors. Every day of this fortnight is sacred, and witnesses the observance of various ceremonies in honour of the dead by thousands of Hindus in every part of India. A well-known Sanskrit text says, "Each day of this holy fortnight is equal in point of sanctity to a day spent at Gaya,"—Gaya being the place regarded as holiest for all kinds of religious rites in memory of the dead. Whatever the actual date of a man's death may be, his

Sraddha (or annual worship of his departed spirit) must be performed on one of the days of this particular fortnight. If a man's father died, say, on an *Ekadashi* (the eleventh day of the moon, waxing or waning), the Ekadashi or eleventh day of this holy fortnight is observed as a day of *special* religious rites in his memory, the *general* worship of his spirit being, however, continued throughout the fortnight. And since there are only fifteen days of the moon, every day of this fortnight is a day of *Sraddha* for some individual or other. Sometimes the day of the full moon (*Purnamashi*) immediately preceding the commencement of the dark fortnight is included in the Pitri Paksha, which is thus extended to sixteen days in order to give a chance of performing *Sraddha* to those who may have lost one of their ancestors on the day of a full moon.

One day of this ancestral fortnight, namely, the ninth, is set apart for the worship of dead female ancestors, especially the mother; and hence this day is called 'Matri Navami.' The annual oblations to all female ancestors must be offered on this ninth day of the moon, irrespective of the *tithi* of their death.

The first half of the month of *Kuar*—the Pitri Paksha—is considered sacred to the memory of deceased ancestors in accordance with a belief, which finds mention in the Hindu scriptures, that as soon as the sun enters the sign of Kanya or Virgo, the spirits

of departed ancestors leave their abode in the regions of the dead, and, coming back to the world of living mortals, occupy the homes of their descendants to receive their homage and worship. And this homage and worship is not only ungrudgingly given, but is regarded as the highest of all earthly duties, by high and low alike. Even Protestant Hinduism has not shaken off its faith in the efficacy of ancestor-worship, which lies at the very root of the Hindu religion. No important religious ritual or domestic ceremony is complete without it. It has to be done before each of the principal *Sanskaras* or purificatory rites that a high-born Hindu has to perform through life. Before *Annaprasana* (the ceremony of feeding a child for the first time with rice or grain food—which takes place about the seventh month); before tonsure; before *Upanayana*, or the ceremony of investing a boy with the sacred thread, the mystical cord symbolical of regeneration; before marriage; in fact, before every event in the household or religious life of every Hindu, the deceased ancestors must be worshipped in a prescribed form. The Pitri Paksha is the fortnight immediately preceding the great *Navaratra*, the 'nine days' during which the goddess Durga, the Universal Mother, is worshipped throughout India, and this order of time is a proof that the worship of ancestors is regarded by the

Hindus as a preliminary even to the worship of the gods.

The principles of ancestor-worship are perfectly intelligible. The dead ancestor is deified into a household god, and is believed to be still protecting his own family and receiving worship and reverence from his descendants as of old; indeed, from his present position among the blessed spirits, he is regarded as wielding greater authority and entitled to greater veneration that when he dwelt on earth. Ancestor-worship is one of the earliest attempts made by the Hindu mind to solve the problems of life, death, and eternity, and the old solution is none the worse for being so old; for ancestor-worship still forms a living part of the daily faith of the whole Hindu world, the only exceptions being those few who in their headlong zeal for reform have not scrupled to transgress the barriers of society and religion alike.

Ancestor-worship, such as it prevails in India, does not, however, mean that *all* the ancestors of a Hindu are worshipped by him during the ancestral fortnight. It is only those who have lost their father that owe this sacred duty; those who have their father still alive are exempt from this obligation. This shows that the so-called "ancestor-worship" is really the worship of the spirit of the deceased *father* alone, though as a matter

of fact the grandfather and the next ancestor also come in for their share of the offerings and oblations. But these latter only derive their right *from* the father, and are worshipped *after* the father. The father is in Hindu households regarded as the earthly representative of God; he is the present God—the visible, living incarnation of the Supreme Being, and is therefore an object of daily worship; and the same father, when departed from the world, continues to be the prime object of worship as long as the son lives, even after the son himself has become a father or grandfather.

The ceremonies customary in this season are of two kinds: (1) the *Sraddha*, which is performed on one day of this fortnight, the day corresponding to the *tithi* of the death; (2) the *Tarpana*, or offering of water, which is continued every day throughout the fortnight. The term 'Sraddha' literally signifies a 'gift offered with faith' or simply a 'pious offering'—not necessarily to an ancestor, but to any dead relation to whom this honour is due. There are twelve kinds of *Sraddha* enumerated in the Shastras, in addition to the annual *Sraddha* performed during the Pitri Paksha, which, though of yearly recurrence, is in no way less elaborate in ceremonial than the obsequies performed on the eleventh day after the actual death of an ancestor, the only difference being that the latter function is

accompanied by multifarious gifts of food, clothing and utensils, which are dispensed with in the case of this annual *Sraddha.* In all forms of *Sraddha* the chief act is the offering of *pinda* or balls of cooked rice and libations of water to the accompaniment of proper prayers.

The term 'Tarpana' literally means 'refreshment,' or more precisely 'a refreshing drink of water.' It is divided into three parts, as the libations are offered first to the gods, next to the *rishis* or sages, and lastly to the ancestors. The gods specially named are Brahma, Vishnu, Rudra, and Prajapati; the sages too are mentioned by name, and they are the principal sages honoured by the whole Hindu world,—Bhrigu, Narad, Atri, Vasishtha, Angiras, Maricha, &c. The ancestors too must be mentioned by name, the father being the first to receive his share; next comes the grandfather, and then the great-grandfather; then come the mother, the grandmother, and the great-grandmother,—making up six in all in the paternal line. Then come the maternal ancestors, three male and three female,—the females of the latter group receiving only a single libation, whereas all others receive three each. After these come the collateral ancestors, and all others (not specified by name) who have died childless, and who have therefore no direct representative to offer oblations to

their spirits. At the conclusion of the whole ceremony, the votary bows down his head to the ground and repeats a short text, the literal meaning of which is:—'The Father is Heaven, the Father is religion (or duty), the Father is the highest form of penance, prayer, or meditation; it is by pleasing the Father that all the gods are propitiated." This text forms as it were the cardinal doctrine of the Hindu faith in "ancestor-worship," and it also serves to illustrate the restricted sense in which the custom of ancestor-worship is to be understood, as signifying principally the worship of the father, and not the whole series of one's ancestors.

Rules of the most minute detail are laid down in the Hindu Shastras for regulating the procedure at these customary annual oblations, and these rules form the basis of the Hindu law of inheritance. The spot where the ceremony is to be performed must be sequestered and scrupulously clean. It should face south, the direction in which the Hindu abodes of the dead are supposed to lie. The ceremony is to be performed by the eldest son, or in cases of his unavoidable inability, by the youngest, to whom however the right must be expressly delegated. Even a minor son has preference over an elderly brother or even an uncle. Female relations have no right to perform *Sraddha,* though childless widows are sometimes given this privilege as a concession.

These strict rules furnish the Hindu with the well-known argument for the necessity of marriage and the procreation of male issue. The annual ceremonies of *Sraddha* and *Tarpana* are to be continued until the departed spirit, in whose honor these are performed, attains beatification, which usually takes place after three generations, and then the soul passes into a state of blessedness and ceases to influence the descendants for good or evil. The sacred grains used in the *Sraddha* and the *Tarpana* are barley and sesamum seed. Shaving or cutting the hair, or even paring the nails, is forbidden on the day of *Sraddha*, but some people abstain from these during the whole of the Pitri Paksha, deriving this practice from one popularly attributed to a legendary king, named Karna. The story goes that Raja Karna made a vow that he would not break his fast daily until he had given a maund and a quarter of gold to Brahmans. After his death he went to heaven, where he was lodged in a palace of gold, and was given nothing but gold for his food and drink,—for in his life his only gift in charity had been gold. In his distress he asked as a boon to be allowed to go back to earth for fifteen days. The boon was granted, and he occupied himself during his time of grace in giving away large quantities of food to the hungry, and was so busy all this time that he neglected to bathe, shave or wash his clothes.

The place which is held to be specially sacred for purposes of *Sraddha* is Gaya, a town about sixty miles south-west of Patna. The object of the annual *Sraddha* is to hasten the progress of the soul through the various stages of spiritual existence; and if the ceremony is performed at Gaya it is believed that the length of these "intervital" periods is cut short considerably, and the soul passes at a bound into Vaikuntha, or the paradise of Vishnu. The Phalgu river at Gaya is a stream sacred to the spirits of departed ancestors. It is on the banks of this river, or at the Vishnupada Temple, that the *Sraddha* at Gaya must be performed, and it is said that at the conclusion of the ceremony, when the cakes are reverently deposited in the river, the spirits of the ancestors are actually beheld in bodily form, receiving the pious offering with a smile of satisfaction. The sacred portion of the same river is said occasionally to flow with milk, but the milk never appears to the eye of unbelievers or those who are wanting in the necessary degree of reverence. Even when the *Sraddha* is performed elsewhere, the offered cakes are, at the end of the ceremony, "directed towards Gaya" by appropriate holy texts.

Illusions like the above may not be mere illusions after all: it depends upon the spirit of the age and upon the faith of the individual how these state-

ments are interpreted. If all the visible and invisible phenomena of the universe be reduced to mere manifestations of Matter and Motion, ancestor-worship is indeed futile; but if Mind be an agent working unseen behind the scenes, then probably ancestor-worship may be taken as a powerful source of divine inspiration in moments of difficulty, darkness, and doubt, and as one of the most potent factors in bringing about peace, and purity, and holiness in human life :—

> "How pure at heart and sound in head,
> With what divine affections bold
> Should be the man whose thought would hold
> An hour's communion with the dead.
>
> In vain shalt thou, or any, call
> The spirits from their golden day,
> Except, like them, thou too canst say,
> My spirit is at peace with all.
>
> They haunt the silence of the breast,
> Imaginations calm and fair,
> The memory like a cloudless air,
> The conscience as a sea at rest:
>
> But when the heart is full of din,
> And doubt beside the portal waits,
> They can but listen at the gates,
> And hear the household jar within."
>
> —Tennyson: *In Memoriam.*

XIV

Durga Puja

Durga Puja, popularly miscalled Dasehra, is one of the greatest of Hindu festivals. It is, as its name suggests, a festival of the Shaktas, or worshippers of Shakti, the conception of the divine attribute of Power represented in female form, and regarded, in her most comprehensive character, as the living Energy or Force of Nature—the mighty Mother of the Universe. The Shakti is adored in various forms, all female, and under various names, all signifying special attributes,—Uma, Gauri, Parvati, Mahadevi, Kali, Tara, Lakshmi, Bimala, being only a few of her thousand appellations. Some of these are benignant deities, calculated to inspire love and reverence; others are only what we must call malignant spirits, fit to inspire awe and strike terror into the heart.

The Shakta creed was until recently—when it received a check in the revival of Vaishnavism through the preaching of Chaitanya—the latest development of Hinduism, the creeds that preceded it in popularity having been Shaivism and Vaishnavism. According to Shaivism, Shiva is the Supreme

Being, and not merely, as he is dimly represented in the Vedas, one of the trinity of Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver and Shiva the Destroyer. He is also regarded as identified with every form and force in nature, and yet thought of as a *personal* God, who possesses a bodily form, and can think, and feel, and act. Vaishnavism is akin to Shaivism in its being a monotheistic faith and in setting aside the triune equality of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. The Vaishnavas regard Vishnu alone as the one true God, especially as manifested in the incarnation of Krishna. These two creeds agree in dissenting from the impersonal pantheism of earlier sects, whose one God is the immaterial substratum of every thing, animate and inanimate. They also agree in holding that this personal God—Shiva or Vishnu—is a male being, but that, whenever he wills to put forth energy for the creation of a world external to himself, his nature becomes duplex. The idea of this duality of the divine nature gave birth to the conception of Shakti, the female counterpart of the Omnipotent,—and this conception came in time to be more honoured and propitiated than the male conception. Hence it is that the worshippers of Shakti became more fervent in their faith and more zealous in their devotion than the worshippers of either Shiva or Vishnu. Shaktism, however, underwent a series of modifications, both in doctrine

and in ritual, until it reached its lowest phase in the horrid rites of the Tantras. The objectionable elements of Tantric ritual caused a violent reaction in favour of the rival creed which Shaktism had supplanted, and the result was a revival of Vaishnavism. The details of the Durga Puja are governed by Tantric texts, but the Puja is one of the purest forms of the worship of Shakti. The prayers and *mantras* repeated on the occasion are taken from the Tantras, but the Tantric forms of drunkenness, debauchery and witchcraft were at no time associated with the festival.

Originally the Durga Puja was held for nine days in succession, commencing with the bright fortnight of the month of *Chaitra* (March-April), the whole Puja season being collectively called the *Navaratra*, or 'the nine nights,'—*night*, because being essentially a Tantric form of worship it used to be conducted in the secrecy of the night. But later on the date of the Puja was shifted forward so as to take place in the moonlit half of *Kuar* or *Aswin* (September-October), and this is the time the festival is held still. There can be no doubt that both these dates were connected with the cutting of the harvest, as *Kuar* and *Chaitra* have always been the two principal harvest seasons in India. But the worship, as a worship, has nothing to do with any agricultural operations. It is believed that this change of dates was

made by Rama, King of Ayodhya, the hero of the *Ramayana*, who invoked the goddess Durga for supernatural aid in his campaign against Ravana, the demon-king of Lanka. The earlier *Navaratra*—that of the month of *Chaitra*—still continues in vogue under a different name, Vasanti Puja; but its importance as a form of worship has now greatly declined, and the festive character of the season is entirely lost.

But while the old spring festival has lost its festive accompaniments, the new autumn festival has gained, at least in Upper India, elements of festivity that never belonged to the old Puja. These elements of festivity are due to the association of this Puja with the victories of Rama, and it has, since the age of Rama, been the practice of the people to celebrate these victories annually in the form of spectacular displays called the Ram Lila. The Ram Lila is an open-air dramatic representation of the principal incidents of the *Ramayana*, designed to instruct ignorant audiences in the moral teachings of the great Hindu epic. Every city and town, every populous village and mart holds its own annual Ram Lila, and there is much friendly rivalry between neighbouring parties in the pomp and splendour with which they can accompany their celebrations. The Ram Lila is usually held for ten days, commencing with the *Navaratra*, and the

incidents selected for special representation are chiefly the incidents of the war in Lanka between Rama's forces led by Hanumana, the monkey chief, and the Rakshasa forces commanded by Ravana and his Rakshasa relations. No character in the Ram Lila is more popular with the rustic audience than Hanumana, who with his long tail standing erect behind his head, marches to and fro on the battle-field at the head of his army of bears and monkeys. Hanumana, or Mahavira as he is otherwise named on account of his invincible prowess, is to the millions of Hindustan the living embodiment of loyalty or personal devotion, and the faithful Hindu heart has long elevated him into a deity and worships his deified spirit in every town and village of Northern India on every Tuesday in the year,—Tuesday being the day sacred to Mangal (Mars), the planet of war. The Ram Lila performances are held in the afternoon for a couple of hours every day. In between the rude acting, a group of singers standing or sitting in one corner of the "stage," chant verses from the *Ramayana* in chorus, attracting a little audience of their own, while the larger audience outside the fencing raise shouts of "Ramchandra ki jai! Ravana ki chhai!" (Victory to Rama! Destruction to Ravana!) at short intervals throughout the play. The Ram Lila ends with the defeat and death of Ravana, whose

immense effigy, made of bamboo lattice-work pasted over with paper, is set fire to and blown up with fireworks at the conclusion of the performance. This takes place on the tenth day, which is called Vijaya Dashami (' the victorious tenth '), in allusion to Rama's final victory over Ravana, which was achieved on this tenth day of the moon of *Kuar*. The Ram Lila, however, is connected with the Durga Puja only by the bonds of association; it does not form a factor of the religious ceremony, for the two celebrations are held independently of each other, and in some parts of India one or the other only holds the field.

The Durga Puja lasts nominally for nine days and nine nights, as the term ' Navaratra ' denotes; but the last three days alone are considered important, every hour of these being filled with elaborate ceremonies and with a continuous round of feasting and merry-making, especially among the younger folk. Of these three days again, the middle one is regarded as the most sacred, and hence it is known as Maha Ashtami (' the great eighth ') because it is on this day that the holiest *puja*, called the *Sandhi Puja*, takes place.

Durga Puja is the stateliest of Hindu pujas, and is one of the few in which the religious duties discharged by the worshippers are of a corporate or congregational nature. Not only are the expenses of

the Puja defrayed by voluntary subscription raised from among the well-to-do people of the town or village, but there is even the offering up of a common prayer to a common deity by a company of worshippers standing together at one spot in front of the image. The image itself is placed in the centre of a lofty structure of wicker-work, with a semi-circular top containing little spaces in which are arranged, according to a prescribed order, a series of diminutive images representing a variety of minor deities. Durga herself is represented as a tall woman with a fair yellowish complexion, yellow being the most sacred of all colours. She has ten arms, each holding either a weapon, such as a scimitar, a club, a bow and arrow, a battle-axe, or else some other suitable symbol, such as a conch shell, a revolving discus, a lotus flower. In one of her lower arms she holds a tuft of hair belonging to the head of an Asur, or demon, upon whom she tramples with one foot, the other foot resting on the back of a lion. The Asur or demon below her foot is Mahishasur, a demon who terrorised the earth in the form of a ferocious buffalo, and to crush whom was one of the special missions that Durga undertook to execute in the world of mortals. For this reason the goddess bears also the name of 'Mahish-mardini' ('destroyer of the buffalo-demon'). The lion is the

vahan of Durga, and this fact accounts for another of her thousand names—'Singha Vahini' or 'rider of the lion.' The image is clothed in a silk *saree*, and each limb is adorned with tinsel ornaments of gold and silver tinge. On the head is placed a *mukut* or crown, surmounted with an aigrette set with sparkling beads of varied colours. On the right side of Durga, stand Saraswati, the goddess of learning, and a step lower, Ganesha, the elephant-headed god of wisdom. On the left side, stand Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and beauty, and a step lower down, Kartik, the commander-in-chief of the army of the gods. Saraswati and Lakshmi are the daughters of Durga; Ganesha and Kartik are her sons,—all sprung from her marriage with Shiva. The images of these four are slightly smaller than the central image, and each is supplied with his or her distinctive symbol of divinity—the lotus flower and conch shell of Lakshmi, the *vina* or harp of Saraswati; while Kartik sits astride on a peacock, and Ganesha is mounted on his *vahan* of a mouse. Each of these seeming trifles has a spiritual significance attached to it in the *Devi Purana*, which is one of the 'authorized' treatises on the subject of Shakti worship.

The offerings made in the Durga Puja include specimens of almost every product of the earth belonging to the animal, vegetable and mineral

kingdoms. Every object which possesses value in the eyes of man is deemed fit as an offering to the goddess. Some of these offerings are made only in emblem,—for example, land, which is offered in the shape of an earthen basin filled with loose earth ; but other offerings, such as *Nava-ratna* (' the nine gems ') are made in actuality, and some of these are considered indispensable. Animal sacrifices too are offered up before the goddess, but these are restricted to goats and buffaloes, both of which must be of male sex and of black colour. The slaughter of buffaloes has long become obsolete, but goat sacrifices are still a common feature. Particular care is taken that the head of the victim should be struck off at a single blow, and the sharpest swords and the strongest arms are therefore used for this purpose. If a second blow should by accident become necessary, it is considered to be a grave ill-omen. The men engaged for decapitating the victims constitute a special caste akin to blacksmiths. In many places blacksmiths are actually employed for this purpose. In numerous households, however, animal sacrifices have been completely done away with, but to keep up the form, and in order that nothing might be wanting to complete the worship, some vegetable, such as a gray gourd, is cut up with a sword in the presence of the goddess. The use of a sword is

indispensable,—if only in the offering of a mock sacrifice ; and some Hindu sects in Rajputana and Nepal observe the custom of worshipping the ancient implements of war at this time. The sword is also one of the symbols of Durga, and is worshipped along with her.

There is a special hour for the offering of sacrifices, and this hour may vary from year to year, as it has to be determined by astronomical calculations. Such is the case also with the hours of the morning and evening worship. For example, in the year 1913 the exact time for the commencement of the morning worship was fifty-one minutes, forty-three seconds past nine, on the day of Mahashtami, while the time for beginning the evening worship was 37 minutes, 13 seconds past eleven. At these precise moments it is believed that the spirit of the goddess lights upon the image for a very brief space of time—"as long as a mustard seed can stand on the pointed edge of a cow's horn." This phrase, stripped of ornament, amounts really to a nonentity, but to the mind of believers it does signify a little fraction of a moment, which the pious Hindu tries spasmodically to seize in order to offer in it his devoutest prayers to the goddess. The hours of worship are given in every reliable *Panjika* or almanac, and are calculated and published several months in advance. Due allowance is made for the different hours of meridian at

different places in India, and the utmost punctuality is observed in the commencement of the holy service, morning and evening, on each of the three successive days of the Puja. Similarly the strictest accuracy is observed in the repetition of the holy texts by the priests, two or more of whom associate together in conducting the worship, each having a copy of the sacred book open before him, in order that each may supply an omission or correct a mispronunciation made by the reciting priest. For the belief is that if in the repetition of a text or prayer the slightest error should take place, though it be in the accidental omission or mispronunciation of a single syllable, a dire calamity is sure to befall the worshipper or his household. After each *puja* prescribed for the day, the inmates of the house and their friends and guests sit together and partake of the *prasad*, the gentlemen dining separately from the ladies, and generally at an earlier hour. In the houses of the rich the *prasad* consists of the choicest delicacies, and the company sitting together at a meal numbers hundreds. In fact the feasting is continuous from midday to midnight on each of the three days of the *puja* season, a fresh batch taking the place of one rising from a meal. The guests invited to a Puja have not only the privilege of enjoying their host's dinner, but have also the corresponding obligation of making an offering to

the goddess, and this offering is usually a cash present, which is very convenient to both parties. For the cash thus collected is the property of the house owner, not of the priest, who only receives his stipulated fee, with perhaps a share of the offerings in kind.

The Durga Puja, as a puja, concludes at a fixed hour of the night on the ninth day of the season. On the tenth day, which is called Vijaya Dashami or Dasehra, the assemblage of images is ceremoniously dipped into a river, this ceremony being known as *Bisarjan.* At sunset, the images are borne to the river bank on the shoulder of the youths of the household or of the neighbourhood, with a long train of followers and bands of musicians, till the river bank is reached and a halt is made. The images are then placed on board a boat and rowed to a spot a few yards away from the bank where the water is deep enough for them to be completely immersed. The images are then stripped of the valuable part of their dress and ornaments, and plunged into the water to the accompaniment of enthusiastic shouts of 'Victory to the Mother!' Thereafter friends visit friends to wish one another good luck and happiness, and at each house thus visited they are requested to partake of some sweets that are offered to them. The exchange of compliments with friends abroad is effect-

ed through that modern institution, the post, and wherever one may happen to be, or however long the correspondence may have been interrupted, the day of Vijaya Dashami is the day of all days on which a Hindu most expects to hear from absent friends.

XV

Kojagara Lakshmi Puja

Lakshmi is now the popular Hindu goddess of wealth and its attendant blessings, and the worship of her, in conjunction with her spouse Narayan, sometimes forms a preliminary to certain religious ceremonies or to certain social functions, such as the feeding of Brahmans. Originally, however, Lakshmi was a mere abstract conception, devoid of form and figure, and denoting simply 'good fortune;' and it is in this sense that the name is used in the Rigveda, the oldest religious book of the Hindus. Later writers represent her as having sprung from the froth of the sea at the time of the "churning of the ocean" by the gods and giants,—an event which forms the subject of a famous Hindu legend adumbrating the manner in which were created some of the objects that subsequently find a conspicuous place in Puranic mythology. This Hindu legend of the *Samudra manthan,* as it is called, is mentioned in the opening chapters of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, and in dim outline it is similar to the classical legend of the war between the gods

and the giants. When Lakshmi first "arose from out the azure main" in all the bloom of ethereal beauty, Vishnu took her as his bride, and it is as the consort of Vishnu that Lakshmi is still conceived by the bulk of the Hindu people. The Vaishnavas are the only sect that disclaim this relationship, for they admit no females in their pantheon, and repudiate and even ridicule the idea that Vishnu was ever "married." Some Vaishnavas, however, hold that Lakshmi is an ideal personification of the deity's more feminine attributes—the softer emotions of sympathy, love, and compassion ; while the more philosophical of them contend that the Hindu gods are represented with consorts only to typify the mystical union of the two eternal principles of generation—Spirit and Matter, *Purusha* and *Prakriti*, which are involved in the very conception of a *created* universe. These theological controversies have long become echoes of the past, and Lakshmi is now worshipped as the goddess of wealth and good fortune by sectarians and non-sectarians alike. Doctrine and dogma have lost their significance in the face of rite and ritual. Differences between sect and sect are becoming more and more merged in common forms of worship. Ever since wealth became an object of value in the eyes of man in society, Lakshmi has been an object of pious worship by Hindus of every caste and creed, and especially by

the Vaishyas or trading clssses of the community. For, as has already been pointed out in an earlier section, different Hindu festivals are especially favoured by different Hindu castes, though all are allowed to join in the common worship and make offerings to the god or goddess of the day.

Kojagara Lakshmi Puja is held on the night of the full moon following the Durga Puja, that is, five days after the Vijaya Dashami, and it may hence be regarded as a sort of sequel to the Durga Puja. It marks the close of a succession of religious forms and ceremonies that are held from day to day practically through the entire light half of *Kuar* or *Aswin*—the whole fortnight being therefore called the *Devi-Paksha*, or the fortnight devoted to the worship of Devi or Shakti. The Devi Paksha invariably commences just after the close of the Pitri Paksha, and this is one proof that among the Hindus the worship of ancestors precedes the worship of the gods. Lakshmi is worshipped again in a more elaborate form a fortnight later,—on the night of the Diwali ; and hence the present *puja* is called *Kojagara* Lakshmi Puja, to distinguish it from the latter worship, which is called the *Dwipannit* Lakshmi Puja, or one accompanied by an illumination. The term " Kojagara " is an abbreviation of a short Sanskrit sentence—

नारिकेल जल पीत्वा कोजागर भुमि तले

which means, "Who, after drinking cocoanut juice, is awake in this lower world?"

This is a question which Lakshmi is believed to put to all the inhabitants of this globe, as she makes her annual circuit round the earth on this holy night; and she is believed to bestow her favours on any one whom she finds awake: hence the drinking of cocoanut juice and the keeping of a vigil are customary on this day. But the vigil is not all: it is invariably preceded by a simple form of devotion, intended probably to solicit the blessed visitation. A figure of the goddess is painted in red ochre or sandal paste on the side of a small brass or copper jug, which is placed in a room or courtyard under a small leafy canopy, and while the priest repeats the holy texts, the oldest married lady of the house, who has been keeping a fast on behalf of the whole household, makes offerings of flowers, fruits, and sweets to the goddess. The offerings special to Lakshmi on this occasion are the cocoanut and *chiura* (or rice flattened by crushing) which are afterwards distributed among the worshippers as *prasad*. The bird sacred to Lakshmi is the owl—the screech-owl, not the hoot-owl, the latter being regarded as a bird of ill-omen by the Hindus as by other people. The owl is also the *vahan* of Lakshmi. The grain sacred to Lakshmi is the paddy, and cowrie shells are her favourite play-

things, probably in reminiscence of her original home amid the waters of the ocean. But more probably the association of the cowrie shell with the goddess Lakshmi has an economic origin. In the earliest times the cowrie shell was probably the only currency in India, and in the sacred books of the Hindus the values of things are frequently given in cowries. Gifts in cowrie shells are also permitted in cases where gifts in kind are not easily procurable or are prohibitive according to the donor's means. For these reasons a Hindu regards the cowrie as sacred, and would never defile it in any way, such as by touching it with his foot, as this is supposed to offend Lakshmi. There are various things which Lakshmi favours, and various others which she strongly disapproves, and Hindu girls in educated families are taught to learn these with particular care, in order that when they grow up to be mistresses of households they might be assured of unbroken happiness and prosperity by virtue of their habitual observance of these supposed commandments of Lakshmi. Among other things, talking in a loud voice, swallowing food in large mouthfuls or with strong avidity, walking with a hasty gait, sitting across the threshold of a door or at the entrance to a passage, talking or listening to scandal, want of personal cleanliness, picking quarrels, laziness, prodigality, are vices which Laksh-

mi looks on with special abhorrence in a female. On the other hand, she promises never to desert a woman who always keeps herself and her house scrupulously clean ; who is well-versed in, and who can perform with her own hands, all the domestic duties pertaining to a Hindu household ; who speaks in a sweet and low voice, walks with slow and noiseless steps, and laughs an inaudible laugh ; who reverences her elders and her gods, paying honour wherever honour is due ; who never sits idle for one moment, finding an hour for every work and a work for every hour ; who daily lays by a little store for the morrow's use, spending what she can for the present day ; who rises from sleep with the dawn and lights the lamp just at nightfall. These wise precepts are strung together in the form of a metrical hymn to Lakshmi, and this hymn is recited or chanted on the evening of the Puja in the presence of the female members of the household seated together. The conch shell is the favourite instrument of Lakshmi,—probably another reminiscence of her ocean home ; and it is one of the daily duties of a Hindu matron to sound the conch shell in honour of Lakshmi just after lighting the house lamp at dusk. The first place where the evening lamp is lighted in a Hindu house, is the store-room, where also the conch shell is sounded, and the reason of this obviously is that all the store

is taken to be the gift of Lakshmi, and that by doing her honour amid these surroundings she is likely to grant continuance to her gifts and also to bestow her blessings in greater abundance.

Lakshmi is also called by the name of Vara-Lakshmi, in allusion to the power, credited by her votaries, of granting boons solicited by her worshippers. Hindu artists represent Lakshmi as a maiden of peerless beauty, seated on a full-blown lotus floating in water, with an elephant on each side of her, pouring water over her head from golden goblets held aloft in their trunks. Her head is adorned with a crown, her neck hung round with a wreath of never-fading flowers—the gift of the Ocean—and her smooth round arms decked with heavenly gems of surpassing brilliance which she has taken out of her "treasures of the deep." She is sometimes represented with four arms, but since she is also the goddess of beauty she is generally depicted with only two. In one hand she holds a lotus bloom, the flower she holds dear above all others; in the other, either a conch shell or a sheaf of paddy. Lakshmi is, and has ever been, a household deity, and she has therefore no temples raised to her in any part of India; but being the goddess of abundance and prosperity, she continues to be the object of fervent adoration by the female folk of the entire Hindu community.

XVI

Diwali or Dip Malika

Diwali, like its predecessor Durga Puja or Dasehra, is not really a single festival, but consists of a succession of celebrations extending over a number of days; but, unlike Dasehra, the Diwali celebrations are different in form and bear different names from day to day. The order of the Diwali series is as follows:—Narak Chaturdashi, Diwali proper, Jamghat and Bhratri Dwitiya. The Dasehra observances are all grouped round a common centre, whereas those of the Diwali shift their point of convergence from one to another object of worship or veneration, and are members of one series only in so far as they follow one another in quick succession in the same week. The Dasehra is properly a festival of the Kshattriyas or the warrior caste; the Diwali is strictly a festival of the Vaishyas or the trading classes. The Dasehra is, or at least was originally, a rural festival, connected with the cutting of the harvest; the Diwali was primarily an urban festival, for the obvious reason that the mercantile classes have always constituted the bulk

of city populations. But there are a few marked points of resemblance between these two festivals, due probably to their intrinsic importance. As in the Dasehra so in the Diwali, a mixed variety of social customs and observances have clustered round the chief religious ceremony of the season, and in both cases the religious growths have been overborne by a weight of parasitical forms, entirely unconnected with religion. The Diwali has again, like the Dasehra, assumed a dual aspect ; for as in the Dasehra we have the worship of Durga and the Ram Lila taking place side by side, so in the Diwali, the worship of Kali and the worship of Lakshmi are held simultaneously on the same night, though not perhaps under the same roof.

The Diwali season commences on the fourteenth day of the dark fortnight of *Kartik* (October-November), this fourteenth day being called *Narak* Chaturdashi, because it commemorates the victory of Krishna over the demon Narakasura. The legend of Narakasura is contained in the *Bhagvata*, the *Kalika Purana*, and other mythologies of the same period. According to these, Narakasura was a fearful demon dwelling in the country called Pragjyotisha, which some authorities identify with the western portion of modern Assam. This demon carried off the ear-rings of Aditi, the mother of the gods. The gods thereupon declared war against

the demon, but were unable to make a stand against him, and so they appealed to Krishna for help. Krishna fought with the demon, slew him, and brought back the stolen jewels in triumph. According to another version, which is more popular, Narakasura carried off the daughter of Vishwakarma, the architect of the gods, and insulted her. The demon had been a notorious kidnapper of girls, and he had been in the habit of seizing and carrying off any beautiful damsel that caught his fancy. In this way he had made for himself a prodigious harem of sixteen thousand mistresses. And now he began to cast profligate eyes on the daughters of the gods themselves. Nothing daunted the intrepid voluptuary; maidens, princesses, nymphs, goddesses were alike in dread of him. The women of both the upper and nether worlds, therefore, joined together in supplicating Vishnu to destroy the demon and restore the sanctity of female honour. But Narakasura, with all his weakness for the fair sex, was a demon of great piety, and had, by penance and meditation, accumulated such a rich store of spiritual merit that Vishnu was for a time not only unwilling but actually powerless to do him harm. But when the load of daily sins outweighed his previous store of virtue, Vishnu gave leave to Krishna to march upon his stronghold and put him to death. But since spiritual merit, once earned, can never be

totally blotted out by any subsequent acts of sin, Narakasura was allowed to crave a boon at the moment of death, and the boon he asked for was that the day of his death might ever be commemorated as a day of feasting in the world. "Be it so," said Krishna, and then with one blow of his sword he made an end of Narakasura and liberated his sixteen thousand imprisoned mistresses in one moment. Such is the legend of Narak Chaturdashi, which is also called Bhoot Chaturdashi, probably through a confused association of the popular meanings of 'Narak' ('hell') and 'Bhoot' ('devil'). Another explanation is that the name Bhoot Chaturdashi alludes to the darkness of the night, a *bhoot* or devil being popularly believed to have a pitch-black complexion. The ignorant people call it *Choti Diwali*, or the Little Diwali.

Various little observances are customary on the day of Little Diwali, and though these observances vary in detail from province to province, they are in the main uniform throughout India. For example, it is usual on this day for people to get up from bed as early as possible, and to have their head and body rubbed with perfumed oil before taking a bath. Every member of the household, from the baby upwards, must have this perfumed bath, which is believed to cleanse all sins as effectively as a bath in the Ganges. Even in places

situated on the banks of the Ganges, this oil bath is indispensable, but it may of course be followed by a water bath in the Ganges, or other river, or even at home, according to convenience; for the Diwali is not a "bathing day" in the same sense as a day on which an eclipse of the sun or moon takes place. After the oil bath, the putting on of new clothes, or at least clean clothes, is equally obligatory. This is followed by a light repast consisting of fruit and sweets. For the Diwali is not a fasting-day either, in the same sense as, for example, the Shivaratri. A sumptuous breakfast comes on in the course of the day, the orthodox hour for the day meal in Hindu households being the hour of noon. A special dish made of fourteen different kinds of *sag* (or vegetable leaves) is also customary at breakfast, the *fourteen* being, as in the case of the knots of the Ananta thread, symbolical of the day of the moon. In the evening, shortly after dusk, fourteen lamps are lighted in and about the house, the *fourteen* being again emblematical of the day being a Chaturdashi.

The most important day of the season is, however, not Chaturdashi, but the next day, the Amavasya, the darkest day of the dark fortnight of *Kartik*. It is this Amavasya, which falls exactly one month after the Mahalaya, that is called by the name of the Diwali. The term 'Diwali' is a

popular abbreviation of 'Dipavali' ('a row of lamps'), and the festival is so-called because at night there is an illumination in every Hindu house. According to some authorities the festival was originally held in commemoration of the liberation of Raja Bali from the bondage of hell through the intervention of the goddess Lakshmi. The legend of King Bali has already been described in the section on 'Raksha Bandhan,' and need not be repeated here. The favour shown to him by Vishnu who left him his kingdom of Patala, instead of seizing his entire dominions, was done at the intercession of his spouse Lakshmi, whose goodwill the deposed monarch had previously won by appropriate prayers and penances. Diwali was thus originally the worship of Lakshmi, but later on it came to be associated with the worship of another goddess, Kali, but how exactly the change came about is now a matter of pure conjecture. It seems that as Vaishnavism began to give way before the advance of Shaktism, not only Vishnu, but his consort Lakshmi as well, began to lose popular favour, with the result that forms of the Shakti began to take the place originally occupied by the various manifestations of Vishnu, the Preserver. Such changes in the origin and significance of the Hindu festivals are pretty common. The Holi, for example, was originally held in

honour of Madan, the god of love, but it came subsequently to be associated with the gay sporting of Krishna.

The most characteristic feature of the Diwali, that which gives its name to the festival, is the illuminations that take place at night. Every Hindu house, from the palace to the hut, is cleaned and swept and whitewashed or mudwashed a few days before the Diwali, and at night the house-tops are lighted up with rows of *chirags* or earthen lamps, the number of which of course varies with the means of the house-holder. The origin of the Diwali illuminations is contained in a popular legend which seems now to be losing ground in popular memory. The legend tells us how an astrologer once foretold to a Raja that on the new moon of *Kartik* (that is, the Diwali Amavasya), his fate or end (*kal*) would come at midnight in the shape of a snake; that the way to escape from death was that he should order all his subjects to clean their houses and to illuminate the city at night; and that the king too should place a lamp at his door and at the four corners of his bed, and sprinkle rice and sweets everywhere about the palace. If the door-lamp should go out, that was a sign, said the astrologer, that the king was about to become unconscious, and in that event he should take care previously to tell his queen to sing the

praises of the fatal snake when he arrived. These directions were carefully followed, and the snake was so pleased with his reception that he told the Rani to ask any boon she chose. Of course the boon she asked was that her husband should be spared. The snake replied that it was not in his power to grant such a boon, but promised to intercede with Yama, god of death, to grant a fresh lease of life to her doomed husband. The snake further asked the queen to continue her watch over the Raja's body, while he himself hurried away with the disengaged soul to the palace of Yama. When the papers relating to the Raja's destiny were put up before Yama, his age was denoted by a zero, meaning that the Raja's life had come to an end in the natural course; but the kindly snake, who had been won over by the flattery of the queen, managed to insert a seven before the nought and made it seventy. Yama looking at the papers exclaimed, "This mortal, I find, has still seventy years to live: take him back at once." So the snake brought back the soul of the departed king, who instantly came to life, and lived seventy years more, and instituted this "festival of lamps" (Diwali) in honour of his resuscitation.

The above legend is, according to some authorities, of much later origin than the Diwali festival, which, in their opinion, was originally instituted in

honour of the spirits of dead ancestors. This opinion gains weight from the fact that all Amavasyas are days held to be specially sacred to the memory of dead ancestors, and it is natural that the Diwali Amavasya should come to be regarded as doubly special for this purpose, as it is the next Amavasya after Mahalaya, the greatest day in the year for the worship of deceased ancestors. It is just possible that the Diwali Amavasya may have been accorded as a 'day of grace' for the performance of *Sraddha* by those who for unavoidable reasons could not render that duty on the day of Mahalaya. Whatever the original character of the Diwali Amavasya might have been, whether it was a day of rejoicing for the resurrection of a Raja, or a day of ceremonious mourning for departed ancestors, certain it is that at the present day the festival is neither the one nor the other, but a day of feasting and sporting, with just a touch of religious worship—the worship of Lakshmi or Kali. This worship is neither very common nor well-known; in these provinces it is practically unknown; but where the worship does prevail it is rarely that the two goddesses are worshipped together.

The worship of Kali is nowhere more popular than in Bengal. It is perhaps the commonest form of the worship of Shakti, and has therefore under-

gone changes of form and ceremony, growing more and more degenerate at every step,—if one may say so without sacrilege—until it assumed its worst form in the drunken revelry of the Kapaliks. The goddess Kali is known by a multiplicity of names, each signifying a separate attribute, but all presenting her to the imagination of her votaries as an object of awe and dread. The appearance of Kali, as she is ordinarily represented in Hindu temples, and as she is described in the Tantric books, is as follows:—She has a jet black complexion, and a terrible gaping mouth, through which her red tongue hangs out, dripping with the blood of the giants she has slain or devoured, whose heads she has strung together in the form of a garland that she wears around her neck. She has four arms, in three of which she holds weapons of war, and in the fourth, a human head. She tramples in ecstasy upon the breast of her husband Mahadeva or Shiva, who lies prostrate on the ground, and she loves to haunt burning-grounds, roaming over them with her long and uncombed hair trailing behind her back. The customary mode of worshipping her is by offering animal sacrifices, but goats alone are now deemed enough to appease her thirst for blood. Among some Shakta sects, the offering of spirituous liquors is also considered an essential part of the worship of Kali, who is regarded by her

votaries as the Universal Mother, and is invoked in the tenderest manner by the name of 'mother.'

The worship of Lakshmi, the other goddess of the day, is not confined to Bengal, but is common in every part of India on the night of the Diwali. The form in which the worship is conducted fixes unmistakably its character as a Vaishya festival. Lakshmi is represented, not by an image, such as Kali and Durga are, but by a gold coin, and it is to this gold coin that the devotional offerings are made. The coin is bathed in the holy water of a sacred stream, or in milk, and adorned with flowers and sandal-paste to the accompaniment of suitable forms of invocation and propitiation. In poorer households, a silver coin, such as a common rupee, does duty for the gold piece ; but the worship of the precious metals in some form is indispensable, as this is believed to be productive of wealth and prosperity through the coming year. The account-books of the family or the firm are also brought out and worshipped, and many people open new account-books from this date. A row of lights is placed in front of the consecrated coin or the account-book, and lamps are also lighted in every part of the house, chiefly at the door or entrance ; for it is believed that Lakshmi rides about the world on her *vahan*, the owl, on the Diwali night, and that she is naturally inclined to enter a house which is

brightly illuminated, in preference to one which is dimly lighted or enveloped in darkness. It is probably this belief that Lakshmi makes a tour of inspection round the world on the night of the Diwali that accounts for the custom of illuminating houses on this particular night of the year. There is a beautiful legend connected with this nocturnal tour of Lakshmi. There was once a Raja who had four daughters. He called them together one day and asked them who gave them their daily bread. The first three replied, "Your majesty, of course." But the youngest proudly declared that her own fate supplied to her not only her daily bread but everything else that she daily enjoyed or suffered. The king was very much in wrath to hear this undutiful disavowal of the royal bounty, and in his rage he banished his ungrateful daughter to the woods after marrying her to a beggarly Brahman who made a precarious living on the charity of his neighbours. And the princess and the poor Brahman began to live in the woods, subsisting on whatever food or money the latter got in alms from day to day. The Brahman had been strictly enjoined by his wife never to return empty-handed, but even to pick up any rubbish lying on the street, rather than return home absolutely without anything. It so happened that one day the Brahman got no alms at all, and was returning home in great dejection when

suddenly he remembered his wife's instruction, and looking about himself, he saw a dead snake lying on the road, and finding nothing better, picked it up and brought it home, more in jest than in earnest. His wife, seeing a dead snake dangling from the Brahman's arms, was at first alarmed, but on being told that that was all he had got that day, she was greatly reassured, and was also rather pleased that her husband had taken care to remember her request never to return home empty-handed. The dead snake was simply flung on the thatched roof of the hut, and there it lay for many days, and nobody thought anything of it. Now shortly after this, as one day the king, the father of this banished princess, was bathing in a tank situated within the bounds of the royal palace, he took off his pearl necklace and laid it on one of the steps of the bathing ghat. Just then a kite suddenly pounced upon it and flew away with it, and in a moment disappeared in the sky. Flying into the woods, the kite noticed the dead serpent lying on the thatch of the princess' hut, and dropping the necklace, it seized the serpent and flew away with it. The princess saw all this, and she took the necklace and kept it with herself, not mentioning the fact even to her husband. She could certainly recognise the ornament, and she probably rejoiced in the thought that she could now repay her father's

cruelty with kindness. The very next day it was proclaimed by beat of drum throughout the kingdom that whoever could furnish a clue leading to the recovery of the lost jewel, should be handsomely rewarded by the king. Hearing this proclamation, the princess asked her husband to respond to the offer and stand forth as a candidate for the promised reward. The Brahman naturally hesitated, not knowing anything of the missing necklace, and it was only on his wife's persistent urging that he consented to go. He was, however, advised not to accept the offered reward, but to demand the fulfilment of a certain condition which he was to name after reference to his wife. The Brahman did as he was advised. He undertook to restore the lost necklace on condition that the king promised to grant a boon which he would name after consultation with his wife. The king agreed and the Brahman came home to receive further instructions from his wife, who advised him to say that the only reward he would accept was that the king should by a royal mandate forbid the lighting of lamps absolutely, even in the royal palace, on the night of the approaching Diwali, for that one year, but that the Brahman alone should be permitted to hold the customary illuminations in his own house in the woods. The king was rather surprised to hear this boon, but he granted it most readily, and the

Brahman came home once more and taking the necklace from the princess, gave it to the king, who forthwith issued a royal proclamation forbidding all illuminations on the night of the Diwali for that one year, throughout his kingdom, in every house and hut, except the Brahman's. Diwali came, and not a lamp was lighted anywhere throughout the kingdom, except in that lonely hut in the woods occupied by the Brahman and the banished princess. At about midnight Lakshmi commenced her annual progress with a view to visiting the houses of those who were her favourites; but the whole world was steeped in darkness that night. Riding on her owl, Lakshmi thought of entering the royal palace, but the palace was not discernible in the darkness. Both she and her *vahan* were in great perplexity, not knowing where to go or how to find their path in that dismal darkness. Repeatedly did she ask her *vahan* to take her to the royal palace as the one spot where she thought there was sure to be light. But even the king's residence was buried in darkness. Lakshmi therefore bent her way towards the forest where she discerned, or thought she discerned, a thin stream of light issuing from a cottage door, far in the thickness of the leafy woods. Towards this cottage door she hastened, and into it she stepped, finding some relief at last after her darksome journey through the

benighted country. Now this cottage was the very same in which the banished princess lived. She had lighted a few lamps in her house in the evening, and had duly worshipped Lakshmi, and she knew nothing of Lakshmi's arrival. She went to bed at her usual hour, and rose next morning at her usual hour, and perceived no change anywhere in her surroundings. But as the days passed on, the king declined in wealth and power and the banished princess rose in the favour of Lakshmi, until the splendour of her position eclipsed the king's fortune completely. For Lakshmi's blessed visit to the lowly hut had the effect of transforming it into a lordly palace; and what was before the lordly palace dwindled down into a lowly hut, and the haughty king who had banished his pious daughter for believing in fate was, by the working of the same fate, reduced to the position of the beggarly Brahman such as the one to whom he had given the hand of his daughter as a punishment. This story, which is intended to illustrate the meritoriousness of worshipping Lakshmi and of illuminating the house on the night of the Diwali, is recited as a *katha* or parable in the presence of the younger members of the household at the conclusion of the *puja*. It is a very old story, derived purely from tradition perhaps, and unrecorded in any of the holy books, so far as the present writer is aware; but modern

readers of the tale will not fail to observe the striking similarity it bears to the story of King Lear, and to recognise the strong impetus it gives to the naturally fatalistic tendency of the Hindu mind.

The Diwali, like the Holi, is a festival of rejoicing. All forms of innocent mirth are deemed fit and proper in this season, and the illuminations too have long been looked upon as nothing more than a form of rejoicing. The Diwali is also, like the Holi, a season for eating sweetmeats. Sweetmeats are not, in the estimation of the common people of India, articles of everyday food, but are meant to be eaten on "state occasions" only. A popular saying well expresses this popular deference for sweetmeats,—"Everyday is not Holi or Diwali that one should eat sweetmeats." Hence probably on these two days of the year, the production, consumption, distribution and exchange of sweetmeats are each carried on with a vengeance. Piles of sweetmeats are displayed in the confectioners' shops in the bazaar; the children keep devouring sweetmeats practically all day, rejecting their daily *dal-roti* with disdain; all grades of people, high and low, rich and poor, get sweetmeats to eat; and hampers of sweetmeats, tastefully arranged, are exchanged among friends and relations. There is one particular kind of sweetmeat which is not sold in the bazaar in any other season—sweetmeat toys.

The Diwali resembles the Holi in yet another respect. Just as the immoral custom of singing obscene songs has become associated with the Holi, in the same way the pernicious practice of gambling has somehow received a semi-religious sanction in the Diwali season. Not merely is it not considered wrong to gamble, but gambling is positively enjoined on one and all, as a holy rite that pleases the goddess Lakshmi, and under this excuse it is indulged in by all classes. All monetary transactions are suspended in the Diwali season on the plea that they are forbidden by Lakshmi ; but probably the real reason of this prohibition is that all the available cash belonging to a household is invested in playing gambling matches, so that none is left for carrying on business. Hence the taking of loans, the repayment of loans, the negotiation of loans are all forbidden, and in some households people are so rigorous that they abstain from cash payments of all kinds, even for purchased goods. Gambling is further encouraged by a superstitious belief that he who does not practise it on the night of the Diwali becomes a loathsome mole in his next birth, losing all the store of religious merit he might have accumulated in the past. The low classes play gambling matches in public places, and on the Diwali night, as one walks through the brightly lighted streets of any Indian town or village, one may see shops and booths

thronged with groups of gamblers seated at tiny gaming-tables, the stake-holder shouting at frequent intervals *Ek lagawe char pawai* (' stake one, win four '), to attract players from among the passers-by. Sometimes people make pretty little fortunes in this detestable game. Even educated Indians are known to indulge in this pastime, and one always hears stories of fortunes made and fortunes marred during the Diwali season every year. So binding is this ancient custom believed to be that even the legal enactment against gambling is relaxed for three days, as a special concession to the superstition of the Hindus.

The Diwali is also the day for women to prepare what is called *Amawas ka Kajal* , or ' lampblack deposited on the new moon.' Lampblack—of course, that which is deposited by an open *chirag* burning vegetable oil—is believed to be a specific remedy against various eye-diseases, and Hindu infants have their eyelids painted with this lampblack as part of their daily toilet. But the lampblack deposited on the new moon of Diwali is believed to possess magic efficacy against all disorders brought about by the "evil eye" (which is technically called "*nazar lagna*") ; and since not only little children but adults also may prove victims to the "evil eye," every one, young and old, applies the Diwali lampblack to his eyelids as a protection against such afflictions. The

Diwali lampblack is produced by a large earthen *chirag*, burning mustard oil, and the soot is allowed to settle on an earthen vessel shaped like a bell, placed just over the top of the flame, the light being kept burning all night by an extra feed of oil, not only to produce an extra quantity of black, but also to have at least one lamp burning all through the sacred night, which is believed to be productive of good fortune. The Diwali *Kajal* is carefully preserved throughout the year to be used on occasions of need, such as during the sickness of a child.

On the Diwali day, too, it is customary for friends and neighbours to exchange presents of sweetmeats and parched rice (' *Khilen* '), the latter being a speciality of the day, same as the *ghughri* is of Nag Panchami. Diwali is also the day on which children must fire crackers, and every pice they can save from sweetmeats is carefully invested in the purchase of fire-works. In the illumination of the house it is the children again that take a prominent part, and there is much good-natured rivalry among neighbours in the matter of this form of display. The Diwali illuminations are seen at their best in Benares, where the beauty of the spectacle is heightened by the situation of the city on the bank of the Ganges, and the unique contour of the temples and other buildings lining the river's edge for miles and miles.

XVII

Jamghat and Bhratri Dwitiya

The Diwali celebrations do not terminate on the day so named, but continue for two days longer—the first two days of the next fortnight, and these two days are commonly named Jamghat and Bhratri Dwitiya. 'Jamghat' is a rather unrefined word with low associations, meaning a 'big assemblage of men,' and the name seems to have been given to the day following the Diwali, probably by some enthusiastic gambler, in allusion to the multitudes of their own fraternity who gather round the gambling-table in hourly-increasing numbers until the maximum figure is reached on the day thus fitly called Jamghat. For on the Diwali day itself the throngs of gamblers do not attain their highest figure, because various other duties clash with the uninterrupted pursuit of gambling, whereas on the following day there is absolute freedom not only from festive observances but also from the avocations of business. The Jamghat is a day on which all respectable Hindu shops are closed, and business is completely suspended. This is really due to the

fact that the old account-books are closed, and the new ones not yet opened, and the holiday observed on the Jamghat is intended to give time to business men to check their cash balances before beginning the new year's entries. But in gambling circles the holiday is supposed to be given in order to afford time for gambling, and gambling is accordingly kept up in full swing at every hour of the day and night.

The vulgar name ' Jamghat ' has a classic equivalent, ' Gobardhan,' a name now falling into disuse and passing gradually into oblivion, as the festival which it denoted is losing popular favour year by year. Gobardhan was at one time a most important rural festival celebrated by the cow-herd caste (*Ahirs*), who occupied a position of consideration in the village community of ancient India, and some of whom, such as Nanda, king of Gokul, were crowned monarchs ruling petty realms and principalities. Except in such parts of the United Provinces as are not yet traversed by a railway line, this old festival may be said to have become altogether defunct. In these rural tracts, however, far from the influences of modern civilization, the festival is still celebrated in all its rural simplicity, with no admixture of elements drawn from the polished life of cities or courts. The women construct a small mud platform in an open place outside the house, and on it they erect a tiny clay hut, in which they place

images of Gauri and Ganesh. They also place there some of the parched grain made for the Diwali, and stick a few tufts of grass here and there into the mud platform, and then wave a rice-pounder (or *musal*) round the whole, invoking blessings on their relations and friends in the following terms :—"May this house grow like the sugarcane and expand like the Ganges and the Jumna." The waving of the rice-pounder is a ceremony emblematic of the expulsion of poverty from their doors.

Gobardhan is therefore a purely cattle feast, observed almost exclusively by the Ahir caste The name Gobardhan suggests a point of association between this festival and the early cowherd life of Krishna passed in the neighbourhood of Mount Gobardhan, a little hillock or stone mound near Muttra, where the god spent his boyhood in tending his foster-father's cattle. The ceremonies connected with the festival are performed chiefly by the womenfolk of the community, the male members honouring the day mainly by large potations of country wine. There is a current saying among the poor that " liquor a hundred years old will be drained on the day of Diwali," and experience has proved that the saying is founded on fact.

In other parts of Northern India, the Gobardhan festival is celebrated somewhat differently. The women make a cowdung figure of Mount Gobar-

dhan, on which they place a little clay image of Krishna lying on his back, surrounded by cowdung cakes, in which are stuck tufts of green grass,—the cakes representing cattle, and the tufts of grass standing for trees, and the whole presenting a graphic model of Krishna's early life when, as a cowherd boy, he used often to lie down on a bank of grass while his cattle grazed around him on the green pastures at the foot of Mount Gobardhan. On this miniature cowdung hill the women place the churn-staff, a bunch of crested sugarcanes, a handful of parched rice, and a lighted *chirag* in the centre. The male members of the village household are then called in, and they bow their heads before this Gobardhan, and are then feasted on rice and sweets. A priest then picks up one of the sugarcanes, crunches a bit of it at one end, and declares the sugarcane crop ripe for cutting. How confusedly things mix up in the hands of the Indian peasant is best instanced in the case of the Gobardhan festival, which, beginning as a celebration in honour of Krishna's cowherd life, ends as a ceremony preliminary to the cutting of the sugarcane crop. It is also the practice for all owners of cattle, residing in the village or in the city, to dye the horns of all their cattle on the day of the Gobardhan festival, and this is believed to act as a protection against disease and accident.

In some Brahman households the only mode of observing the day following the Diwali is for the ladies of the house to paint all door frames belonging to the house with vermilion spots, chiefly the two upper corners of the *chowkhat* ; but this custom has obviously nothing to do with the cattle feast, but seems rather to form part of the worship of Lakshmi conducted the previous night, for vermilion is an object sacred to Lakshmi. Vermilion is not only a symbol of matrimony among Hindu females, but one kind of it is called Sri, which is also one of the names of Lakshmi herself. The door frames are marked with these spots of red, probably as a token of welcome or thanksgiving to the benignant goddess of wealth. This explanation of the custom is, however, an inference or conjecture, not corroborated by any scriptural testimony.

Bhratri Dwitiya is the second day after the new moon of Diwali. It is a day specially observed by women who have brothers,—hence the name 'Bhratri Dwitiya' or its popular form 'Bhaiya Dwij,' which means 'the second day of the moon sacred to brothers.' The brothers receive an affectionate invitation from each of their sisters to be present at their house on this festive day, and wherever the visit is practicable or convenient, the invitation is as a rule gladly accepted. If any brother and sister happen to be living with their

parents, the ceremony of the day becomes much simpler, as the formalities of issuing and accepting invitations are necessarily dispensed with. The ceremonies of the day commence, as is usual with all Hindu ceremonies, with a holy bath,—the bath specially ordained on the day of 'Bhratri Dwitiya' being a bath in the Jumna; but if that be not possible, any other river is held to be as good a substitute, or if no river is at hand, a bath at home is the last resort. 'Bhratri Dwitiya' is a great day for bathing in the Jumna, and in places situated on the banks of this river there is always a *mela* on this day. Both brother and sister take their bath and keep a fast until the ceremony of the day is over. This consists in the sister's presenting to her brother a new *dhoti* and *dupatta* (wearing-cloth and scarf), which he has to put on then and there, and thus attired he takes his seat on a carpet spread on the ground. The sister then comes forward to do him honour by bowing down to him, if the brother happens to be elder in age; but if he is younger, it is he that bows down to her and receives her blessings. The sister then places in the hand of the brother a quantity of the best sweetmeats, and in addition makes a cash present, which is, however, invariably returned with suitable additions from the brother's own pocket. But the most important part of the ceremony is the *tilak*, or

streaking the brother's forehead with holy paint. This is always the sister's part, which is not reciprocated by the brother. Every sister has to give the *tilak* to every brother, without distinction of age. The holy mark is made with the little finger of the *left* hand,—for in the case of women the left portion of the body is used for a variety of religious functions, as we saw in the case of the wearing of the Ananta thread; the sister must also bend herself on the left knee while giving the *tilak*: and the brother must sit with his face to the east. There is a prescribed formula which has to be repeated by the sister during the performance of each *tilak*, and a suitable form of blessing accompanying the offering of a holy draught of milk and honey, which the brother sips three times after it is poured into the hollow of his hand. The formula of the *tilak* ceremony, literally translated into English, means :—"Thus do I streak my brother's forehead, and thereby plant a thorn at the door of Yama (*i.e.*, make his entrance into the abode of the dead impossible). As Jumna streaked the forehead of her brother Yama, so do I in the case of my own brother. As Yama is immortal, so may my brother be immortal likewise!"

In Hindu mythology, the river Jumna is indeed called the sister of Yama, king of the dead; but no record is found of her having ever streaked his fore-

head, except in this formula, which is of precarious origin and unknown authorship. Yama is undeniably one of the immortals, and Jumna is as certainly his sister; and this imaginary relationship of the two has given birth to a festival which serves to strengthen and perpetuate among the Hindus the bonds of affection between brother and sister, which, but for this periodic renewal, would tend to weaken and decay, after the sister has left the paternal home and made for herself a new one in perhaps a stranger land, where other and later and stronger ties soon fasten her heart and fetter her limbs too heavily to give the housewife and the matron many chances of visiting the ancestral roof and reviving the dear old associations of her girlish days. In the *tilak* ceremony, each sister takes a part turn by turn, and where the number of brothers and sisters happens to be a pretty large one, the ceremony becomes an imposing spectacle and occupies several hours of the morning. Cousins, both male and female, are also allowed to take part in the ceremony, and this is really the rule in all joint Hindu families, for the Hindu makes little distinction between a brother and a cousin or between a sister and a cousin in domestic or social matters. Even brothers " by courtesy," such as the sons of one's father's friends, are recognised as brothers on this day, and are given presents of sweet-

meat or invited to the common banquet, or honoured in a higher degree according to the degree of intimacy subsisting between the friendly families.

The *tilak* ceremony is followed by that of ceremonious blessing, which consists not only in the expression of all kinds of good wishes for the brother's long life, health and happiness, but also in the sister's placing a few grains of unhusked paddy and a few blades of green *durva* grass (popularly called Panic grass in English) on the brother's head, as an accompaniment to the blessing. The paddy and the *durva* grass are the invariable accompaniments of a ceremonious benediction, because the paddy is the Hindu emblem of prosperity, and the *durva* grass is a type of immortality—of imperishable, ineradicable life. This form of ceremonious blessing is, however, only observed in the case of a brother who is younger than the sister; if the brother is older, he does bless his sister in return for her bow, but not with any such ceremony. The hour for *tilak* is usually the morning, but the exact time of the ceremony depends upon the duration of the Dwitiya *tithi*. There are certain days of the week, such as Tuesdays and Saturdays, which are considered inauspicious for the giving of *tilak*; and hence whenever 'Bhratri Dwitiya' happens to fall on one of these days, the *tilak* is dispensed with, but the other details are gone through in due order.

The most interesting part of the programme is that which comes last, usually about midday, and this is the banquet. Rows of cups and dishes filled with the most tempting delicacies are placed before the brother, who is expected to do justice to a meal that would ordinarily suffice for a dozen ; for the banquet is not only an outcome of the sister's affection, but also a token of her husband's status in society,—with perhaps an added element of display running through the whole. In many cases the sister cooks the day's meal with her own hand, as far as she can ; but in no case do the brother and sister dine together—no grown-up males and females ever can do so in any Hindu household.

The formula repeated by the sister during the *tilak* ceremony is, strangely enough, worded in the vernacular, not in Sanskrit. This shows that it is not of very ancient origin, or at least that it is not taken from any of the recognised sacred books of the Hindus. But it is the vernacular garb that makes the formula repeated with such manifest emotion, and not in the dry mechanical manner in which *mantras* in Sanskrit are pronounced or mispronounced by people ignorant of their meaning.

XVIII

Akshaya Navami

Akshaya Navami is the ninth day of the light half of *Kartik*, and occurs exactly one month after the ninth day of the Navaratra. Like the earlier Navami, it is a day set apart for the worship of the Shakti; but on the present occasion the worship does not extend over nine days and nine nights, but begins and ends on the same day. Nor is the Shakti worshipped on this day under the name of Durga, the goddess of victory, but under the more dignified appellation of Jagaddhatri, 'the sustainer of the world.' It seems rather a redundancy for the same Shakti to be worshipped twice more after the prolonged ceremonies of the Navaratra,—once on the day of the Diwali, and again nine days after the Diwali. But the great difference between the Durga Puja on the one hand and the Kali Puja and the Jagaddhatri Puja on the other, is that the former is a communal—one might almost say national—celebration, whereas both the latter, as far as the element of worship goes, are more or less individual, confined only to particular households,

and not joined in by the whole community as a community. Indeed, as in the case of Kali Puja during the Diwali season, the worship of Jagaddhatri on the day of Akshaya Navami is now practically unknown in places outside Bengal. But the original object of instituting a second festival, the Jagaddhatri Puja, and fixing the date of it only a month after the first, the Durga Puja, was probably to give to pious people the chance of offering to the Universal Mother the first fruits of the late autumn crops, those, namely, that are not ripe for harvesting at the date of the earlier Puja. For, according to the principles of the Hindu religion, no article of food is fit for human consumption until it has been sanctified by being offered to a god or goddess. Even in the case of the individual's daily meal, it must be offered to the gods before he can take it.

Akshaya Navami is strictly not a festival, but a mere domestic ritual; it is therefore unattended by any of that pomp and circumstance of worship which accompanies the Durga Puja; there is no interchange of friendly greetings, no social reunion, no gay or gaudy rites, no popular festivities, no public rejoicing. It is celebrated in a quiet, unostentatious manner in the privacy of the home, and sometimes the simplicity of form is carried to such a point that the goddess Jagaddhatri is not even represented by an image, but only by a brass or

copper jug duly consecrated by holy texts. According to some authorities, Akshaya Navami owes its origin to the fact (although the fact in this case amounts only to a fiction) that it was on this day that the Sun-god, Surya Deva, worshipped Durga, and was in return rewarded with many a blessing,—such as offspring in the shape of the fruits of the earth; health, as evidenced in the fact of the sun's daily unfailing course through the heavens; riches, that is, those gems that derive all their lustre from the sun's rays; and, above all, the priceless gift of seeing all things and making all things visible. The Sun was one of the earliest Vedic deities of the Aryans, and he is still an object of daily worship to thousands of their descendants; and the myth telling of the Sun-god's having worshipped Durga is manifestly a clever device invented by some zealous Shakta to elevate the position of his favourite goddess in the eyes of rival creeds. Be that as it may, the tradition that Akshaya Navami marks the day on which the Sun-god worshipped Durga, remains a tradition to this day, though as a matter of fact it is not universally believed in.

Akshaya Navami has, however, a sanctity other than that it derives from the Sun-god's supposed worship of Durga; the day constitutes an important chronological landmark, for, if we may rely on

tradition again, it was on this day that the *Treta Yuga* commenced. The *Treta* is the second of the four great ages into which ancient Hindu writers have divided the entire duration of Time in its relation to the world—the first being the Satya Yuga, the popular conception of which is very similar to that of the 'Golden Age.' These ages or *yugas* are, of course, as vaguely defined as it is natural for such immense tracts of time to be, and to most Hindus, therefore, the *Treta Yuga* is best known as the age of Rama, and the *Dwapara* as the age of Krishna.

The special merit resulting from the worship of the Shakti on the day of Akshaya Navami, is that the worshipper is rewarded with the "attainment of the kingdom of peace which is free from all toil and trouble." There is a special reward to be gained also by those who take part in the *Bisarjan* ceremony, the ceremony of plunging or immersing the holy image in water at the conclusion of the worship; and this reward consists in the "attainment of unrivalled sovereignty, the begetting of sons and heirs, the possession of wealth, power, slaves, and the gaining of complete emancipation from the bondage of sin." So speaks the *Devi Purana* to the faith of the devout Shakta. The same sacred book also lays down that the merit obtained by worshipping the Devi on this one day is equal to

the cumulative merit obtained by worshipping her for four months continually.

The greatest characteristic of this holy day—that which gives it its distinctive epithet of 'Akshaya'—is that gifts bestowed on this particular day of the year continue to bear blessings for ever. Similarly any wrong or act of sin committed on this holy day never ceases to bear evil fruit at any time. This is why this Navami is called *Akshaya*, which literally means 'indestructible.' A similar 'indestructibility' belongs to four other days under special conjunctions,—(1) to an Amavasya, if it happens to fall on a Monday,—hence the sanctity of what is called a "Somavati Amavasya;" (2) to a Saptami, if it falls on a Sunday; (3) to a Chaturthi, if it falls on a Tuesday; and to an Ashtami, if it falls on a Thursday. In each of these cases the day becomes 'Akshaya,' which is defined in astrological almanacs as meaning 'a day on which a good or bad deed done by a person does not lose its effect for sixty thousand lives.'

The usual mode of celebrating the Akshaya Navami festival in Upper India is by making gifts to Brahmans. The gift especially appropriate to this day is the gray gourd (or what in Hindustani is called *petha*). This vegetable is seldom eaten as a vegetable; its only use is in the preparation of a kind of sweetmeat or jam which possesses nutritive

and medicinal properties of high value according to the Ayurvedic pharmacopœa. Sometimes a gift of *pancha-ratna* ('five gems') accompanies the gift of a gourd, by being inserted inside the centre of the vegetable in such a way as to conceal it from the eyes of the recipient. The 'five gems' are gold, silver, copper, coral, and pearl; and the secret insertion of these within a big vegetable before being given away to a Brahman constitutes a most meritorious form of charity, known as *Gupta Dan* ('secret charity'). But it is not within the means of ordinary folk to earn this merit by this rather expensive form of charity; hence the common people observe this festival by simply taking a bath in the Ganges and giving away a few pice in charity to Brahmans on the river bank.

Akshaya Navami is also associated with a touching episode of the *Ramayana*, in connection with which there is a special celebration held at Allahabad. It was on this day that Bharata met his brother Rama, when the latter was returning home at the expiration of his fourteen years' banishment, the concluding portion of which was occupied by the conquest of Lanka and the slaying of its demon-king, Ravana. Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana were travelling in an aerial car (*Pushpaka ratha*), which belonged to Ravana, and which had been presented to Rama by Bibhishana in gratitude for

his having been installed on the throne of Lanka. As the flying car was passing over Prayag, Rama made up his mind to pay a visit to the holy sage Bharadwaja, at whose hermitage he had put up for a day on his way to the forest fourteen years before. The aerial car alighted on the ground, and Rama and his party entered the hermitage of Bharadwaja, from whose lips they learned glad tidings of home for the first time since they had left the wooded hill of Chitrakuta and proceeded into the deeper forest regions of Southern India.

Word was immediately sent to Bharata of Rama's arrival at Prayag, and Bharata hastened from Nandigram, a village, not far from Ayodhya, from where he was ruling the realm as Regent, during Rama's absence. Bharata came to the holy *asram* with all the speed he could, and it was at the hermitage of Bharadwaja that the "meeting with Bharata" (*Bharta-Milap*) took place. This happy meeting of the two brothers after a painful separation of fourteen years, is an event which is annually celebrated with much rejoicing all over India, and nowhere with more rejoicing than in and about the actual site of the ancient hermitage, where a group of little unimposing temples, standing amidst rather squalid surroundings, marks the place where India's greatest *rishi* had his residence, and where he devoted his life to the peaceful work

of teaching the holy scriptures to a band of adoring disciples, who at one time numbered thousands and constituted a university of their own, long before Sir Alfred Lyall conceived the happy idea of restoring to Prayag its ancient seat of learning.

XIX

Devotthan Ekadashi

Devotthan Ekadashi is not a feast, but a fast. It occurs on the eleventh day of the brightening moon in the latter half of *Kartik*, just two days after the Akshaya Navami. The epithet ' Devotthan ' signifies that on this day the god Vishnu is believed to wake up from sleep, the literal meaning of the word being ' the rising up of the god.' According to the *Puranas*, Vishnu sleeps for four months in the year, from the eleventh of the light half of *Asarh* (hence popularly called the ' Sayana Ekadashi ') to the corresponding day of the month of *Kartik*, on which he wakes up from his sleep—the whole period of the god's rest being called the ' Sayana.' The first of these Ekadashis is not marked by any particular celebrations, except that in some villages the women mark their houses with lines of cowdung, and observe a partial fast, eating only fruit and sweetmeats in the evening. During the four months of the god's slumber it is considered unlucky to hold any auspicious ceremonies, such as marriage, " regeneration," tonsure, and the like. Even repairing the old thatch

of the house or re-stringing the household cots or *charpoys* is deemed improper. These four months, it will be observed, cover the whole of the rainy season, which, in a tropical country like India, is the most unhealthy season and is popularly called the *Chau-masa*, 'the four (evil) months.' By a natural association the most unhealthy season has come to be believed as the most unlucky season of the year, in which all domestic rites and duties are forbidden or at least deemed inauspicious.

Vishnu enjoys his long sleep, not in heaven his usual abode, nor on earth, the scene of his successive incarnations, but deep down in the interior of the earth, where the Nag-king Sesha rules his subterranean realm. Sesha is an enormous serpent or python having a thousand heads, representing infinity, for which reason he is also called Ananta ('the endless'), which name is again, by a hypallage, transferred to Vishnu himself. This serpent-king forms both the couch and the canopy of Vishnu during his four months' sleep. The Sesha Nag is also represented in Hindu cosmography as bearing or supporting the globe on his thousand heads. Sometimes he is spoken of as the ruler of *Patala*, the nether world; and sometimes he is believed to have impersonated himself as Balarama, brother of Krishna. According to popular belief, all earthquakes are caused by this Snake's occasionally

shaking one of his thousand heads, in the process of transferring the globe from one to another.

The belief regarding Vishnu's sleep has been expanded into a wider belief representing all the other gods as sleeping during the same interval, and waking up from sleep one after another during the whole of the bright fortnight of *Kartik*, one or more on each day, until on the day of Purnamashi (or full moon) all the gods are supposed to be awake again to preside over human affairs. This wider belief is no doubt the outcome of a popular gloss on the legend relating to Vishnu's sleep, and was probably set afoot by a favourite Vaishnava saying, '*Sarva deva maya Hari*,' meaning 'Hari or Vishnu represents in himself all the gods;' it follows therefore that when Vishnu is asleep all the other gods are plunged in slumber likewise. Whatever the origin of this belief might be, it has got such a hold of the theological mind that some Hindu almanacs contain a full list of the names of the sleeping gods, together with each one's date of awakening noted against each. But of all 'awakening' days the only one that is honoured with some kind of solemnity is the Ekadashi. The Ekadashi, or eleventh day of a fortnight, is a day of fasting and prayer occurring twice in every month, and is regarded as a day sacred to Vishnu; and there are in all twenty-four such fasts observed every year. So meritorious

is the Ekadashi fast believed to be, that there is no difference between an Ekadashi of the bright fortnight and one of the dark fortnight, both being meritorious in an equal degree. The merits ascribed to the Ekadashi fast are of the highest order ; many of them are stated in an obviously exaggerated form, but the object of the exaggeration is only to emphasize the value of the merits. For example, an Ekadashi fast is held tantamount to performing penance for 60,000 years ; it is also equivalent to making a gift of a thousand kine to Brahmans or feeding millions of starving beggars, and so on. It is also equal in efficacy to undertaking a number of holy pilgrimages, or wearing the body out by rigid austerities. It gives one eternal felicity in the highest heavens, and enables the pious soul to attain all its ends both in this life and in the next.

The above beliefs with respect to the incalculable spiritual merit arising from observance of the Ekadashi fast, are based on two legends contained in the *Mahabharata*. One of these relates to a sage named Bhadrashila, son of Galab Muni, who became a devout votary of Vishnu from early boyhood, and gave up the study of the Vedas and the practice of the customary religious rites in order to devote himself whole-heartedly to the worship of Hari. From the same early age he solemnly undertook to observe the Ekadashi fast twice every month. His

father once asked him why he preferred this rigorous form of devotion to the many easier ones laid down in the holy books and declared to be equally efficacious. The son replied that the merit accruing from the observance of the Ekadashi fast was literally infinite—as infinite as the star-lit sky or the boundless ocean. He had had the good fortune of receiving a direct revelation from God on this subject, and he had, in the same manner, been let into the secret of his former birth, an account of which he then proceeded to give to his father:—"In my former life," said Bhadrashila, "I was a powerful king oft he lunar race, and bore the name of Dharmakirti. As a man I was a wicked sinner; as a king, a hated tyrant; and in both capacities I continued for many years to heap a growing load of sin upon my head. One day I went out on a hunting expedition, escorted by a regiment of soldiers. Soon I spied a lovely deer in one of the forest brakes, and I ordered my attendants to make a cordon round the animal, and never to let the game escape, on pain of death. It so happened that the deer made its escape at a point where I was myself standing on guard. I could not blame my soldiers; it was my own negligence that had allowed the beast to break loose, and in very shame I shot an arrow after the flying deer; but to my further shame, I missed the mark, andin a moment the fleet runner

had bounded away out of sight. Stung by shame, I galloped my horse and pursued the fugitive game right into the thick of the forest; but the sly beast was nowhere in sight. In the course of my hot search, my poor steed stumbled and rolled down on the ground a lifeless carcass. The shades of evening were closing around me and enveloping the dark forest in a darker fold; hunger and thirst were gnawing at my bowels. Benighted, bewildered, bereft almost of sense and motion, I laid myself down at the foot of a tree, and when the night advanced, and the forest beasts began to prowl around, the powers of Nature refused to sustain my life any longer, and I expired. As soon as the breath forsook my body, I beheld two emissaries from Yama standing beside me, and shortly they bound my soul and carried it to the abodes of the dead. On seeing my spirit, Yama was very angry with his servants for taking my soul to his region, for he said that I was absolved from all sin, in that I had breathed my last in a state of fasting on an Ekadashi day,—a fact of which I myself had not the faintest idea. So, instead of subjecting my soul to torture, Yama made obeisance to me, and my soul was forthwith uplifted from the nether regions to the highest heaven of Vishnu, borne all the way up in an ethereal chariot specially sent down for that purpose. And in this celestial abode I dwelt

for millions of years in the uninterrupted enjoyment of felicity such as man cannot picture even in his dreams." Bhadrashila's story made such a profound impression on the mind of his father that the old man immediately became a convert to Vaishnavism, and he too undertook the Ekadashi observances as strictly and regularly as his son.

The *Mahabharata* supplies us also with a detailed account of the mode in which the Ekadashi fast is to be observed—an account which is obviously one of the many interpolations that mar the purity of the great epic. According to this account, the man who wishes to observe this fast in the proper fashion, should first take a bath early in the morning, without the customary application of oil on the head and body. He should then proceed to worship Vishnu in the following style :—Let him take his seat on a clean carpet (*asana*), after sanctifying it with the prescribed texts and signs. Let him next go through a series of gestures, and recite a number of holy hymns in honour of Vishnu. After this he should repeat the name of the god twelve times on his fingers, preferably 1008 times, and let him at each repetition visualize the divine image with the fullest concentration, so as distinctly to behold a picture of him "in his heart." Thereafter he should offer flowers, fruits, sweets and *tulasi* leaves

to the image of the god, and then bow his head down to the ground and finish his devotions. The next thing is the fast, which must as far as possible consist in total abstinence from both food and drink for the whole day and night. On the following day he should repeat the early bath and the morning devotions, and then feed some Brahmans, together with his friends, relations and guests, before he breaks his own fast. The usual number of Brahmans fed on such occasions is twelve, and the breaking of a fast, called the *paran*, in proper form is only one degree lower in importance than the proper observance of the fast itself. And if both the fast and the breaking of it have been observed in the manner specified above, the reward is "freedom from all sorrow." This is a high reward indeed, but what makes it higher still in value is that it is both divisible and transferable at the recepient's option. The second legend in the *Mahabharata* illustrates this last point about the Ekadashi fast. There was once in Shantipur a learned Brahman, named Devamali, who was the owner of a large fortune which he had amassed by various lawful means, such as farming, trading and banking. But with all his power and pelf, the Brahman was an unhappy man for want of a son. The Vedas say that the man who has no son, lives his life in vain, both in this world and in the next; and the

feeling that the current of his life was about to lose itself in a sandy desert, rankled constantly in the Brahman's heart, and made him and his wife exceedingly miserable. One day, as the Brahman was sitting in a sorrowful mood, the saint Narada happened to come on a visit to him, and on being asked why he looked so melancholy, the Brahman replied that being a childless man he felt his life to be a burden. Narada advised him to hold a *Yajna* or sacrifice, assuring him that by this means he was sure to be blessed with offspring even yet. The Brahman accordingly held a great sacrifice, and lo! out of the smouldering embers of the sacrificial fire arose a pair of boys, lovely as cherubs, and to all appearance of happy fortune. One of them was named Yajnamali, 'the child of sacrifice;' the other was named Sumali, 'the child of beauty.' When the boys grew of age, their father Devamali settled his wealth and property on his two sons in equal shares, and renouncing the householder's life, went into a forest on the banks of the Narbadā, to spend the remainder of his days in prayer and meditation; and his faithful wife followed him to his retirement. In the woods, the recluses betook themselves to the hermitage of Jananti, a sage who was renowned for his knowledge of the scriptures, and whom they found at that moment surrounded by a circle of admiring disciples. Noticing a stranger, the sage

asked him who he was and what his object was in coming there. The Brahman replied that his name was Devamali, that he was sprung from the line of Bhrigu, and that he had come to learn the practice of religious austerities with a view to obtaining salvation. Jananti made answer: "Seek refuge from thy sins, not in a forest, but in Vishnu, the lord of the universe, under whose protection all trace of sin vanishes. No earthly creature can do without his protection, since he is the fountain of life, and the quintessence of all forms of being. Repeat his name, worship his spirit, obey his commandments; reverence him in thy heart, serve him with thy hands, name him with thy lips,—and thou shalt steer safely across the troubled waves of mortality."

The Brahman was very happy to receive his spiritual guidance, and leaving the holy presence of the sage, he repaired to the banks of the Jumna, where he spent the remainder of his life in devotion to Vishnu. And when he died in the fulness of time, his faithful wife immolated herself on the same pyre with him, and both were admitted into the paradise of Vishnu. Now, of his two sons, born of the holy sacrifice, Yajnamali grew up to be a man of great righteousness and piety, spending large sums of money in private charity as well as on works of public utility. In course of time he was blessed

with sons and grandsons, and lived a life of unalloyed happiness through the favour of Vishnu, in whose honour he kept the Ekadashi fast and observed various other forms and ceremonies. His brother, Sumali, on the contrary, turned out a knave and scoundrel, and falling into evil company, he squandered all his money upon unworthy objects, and ultimately became a sinful wretch of the blackest type. One day Yajnamali admonished him in the presence of the leading men of the village, exhorting him to abandon his wicked ways, but instead of feeling ashamed or repentant, Sumali was stung into a sudden wrath, and in his fit of rage he slapped his brother rudely on the face, and publicly insulted him. Thereupon the village headmen caught him, and bound him up with chains, and laid him on the ground, pinioned hand and foot, and pressed under the weight of an enormous boulder. But his brother, pitying his distress, released him from that torture, and forgave him the insult he had offered. The village community then declared him an outcaste, and turned him out of the village bounds. Shortly afterwards, Yajnamali died, and as he was being carried to heaven in an aerial car, he met a man on the way who was being ruthlessly dragged by two dark-looking hangmen. Not knowing who the wretched fellow was, he asked the conductor of the car if they knew the man, and they said

it was Sumali, his own brother. Sumali's unhappy fate deeply touched his brother's heart with pity, and he generously gave away a portion of his own spiritual merit to his unfortunate brother, whom he thus released from the cruel grasp of Yama's emissaries, and the two brothers then entered heaven where they dwelt in felicity for interminable ages.

These legends go to prove the sanctity of Ekadashis in general ; special Ekadashis have, over and above these general rewards, rewards of a special nature assigned to them. Such special Ekadashis are the Nirjala Ekadashi of the month of *Jaishtha* or June, the Vaikuntha Ekadashi of *Magh,* and the Devotthan Ekadashi of *Kartik.* Of these again the best known is the last. The first is so-called because it is customary for those who observe it ' not to taste even a drop of water ' that day. The second is called Vaikuntha Ekadashi because it assures the blessings of heaven to those who keep a fast on that day. The origin of the name Devotthan has already been explained.

Devotthan Ekadashi, popularly called Deothan or Dithwan, is now a purely rural festival, if the name festival may properly be given to ceremonies devoid of all elements of festivity or mirth. Like the Gobardhan, it has degenerated into a bucolic ceremony inaugurating the cutting of the sugarcane crop. In villages the people paint the cane-press

with a kind of red paint, and light a row of lamps upon it even in the day time. The owner of the crop then worships his household gods in the middle of the field, and breaks off some stalks of sugarcane which he places across the eastern boundary of the field. He then presents five canes each to the village priest, the blacksmith, the carpenter, the washerman and the barber—the five most important members of the village community; and he also takes five canes home. There, on a wooden board or low stool, two images, one of Vishnu, and the other of Lakshmi, are drawn with ghee and cowdung. On the same board are placed a little cotton wool, some fruit and sweet; a fire sacrifice (*agiyar*) is then performed, and the five canes are placed round the sacred board a few inches apart, while their bushy tops are tied together into a tangled knot. When these preparations are complete, the priest is called in, and he brings the "Saligrama." The "Saligrama" is a smooth spherical pebble, of jet black colour, of the size of an egg, which is kept in a large percentage of Brahman households as a handy emblem of Vishnu or Narayan, which can be moved about from place to place, unlike the other images or idols which cannot be removed from the shrines in which they have been installed with due ceremony. The 'Saligrama' is worshipped by the

priest with offerings of flowers, etc.; and then the women sing songs of praise to Vishnu to wake him up from sleep and to induce him to accept their offerings. The knotted tops of the sugarcane are then broken off, and while the main stalks keep standing round the sacrificial board, their bundled-up crests are flung on the roof of the house, and there they remain at the mercy of the weather until the Holi season, when they are thrown into the bonfire and burnt. When the whole ceremony is over, the priest consults his almanac, and declares the auspicious hour for commencing reaping operations, which begin some time the same day amidst much enthusiasm,—enthusiasm due not only to the prospect of a handsome return for the crop, but to the more immediate prospect of getting jugfuls of the fresh sweet juice to drink. At night it is customary in some places, such as Benares, to have temples and places of worship (*Thakur-Dwaras*) illuminated, much in the same style as on the Diwali night.

The Devotthan Ekadashi is generally observed as a close fast by all Hindus, and not only by Vaishnavas. Some abstain from food and drink through the whole day and night; others observe only a partial fast, and take a light meal usually consisting of milk, sugarcane juice, and boiled *shakar kand*, a kind of sweet potato which the

rustics call *Ganji*,—the last two being the speciality of the day. The rules of fasting at the present day are by no means so stringent as they were in ancient times. Several severe forms of abstinence specified by Manu have become quite obsolete now, such as the fast called "Atkrichchra," which consisted in eating only a single mouthful of food every day for nine successive days, and then abstaining from all food for the next three days. Another austere fast, called the "Chandrayana Vrata," consisted in diminishing the consumption of food every day by one mouthful for the waning half of the lunar month, beginning with fifteen morsels at the full moon, and ending with a total fast at the new moon, and then increasing it in like manner during the next fortnight. Nevertheless the custom of fasting is so prevalent in India that, as Sir Monier Williams remarks, "no Christian man—be he Roman Catholic or Anglican—not even the most austere stickler for the most strict observance of every appointed period of humiliation and abstinence, can for a moment hope to compete with any religious native of India—Hindu or Mohamedan—who may have entered on a course of fasting, abstinence, and bodily maceration."

XX

Kartiki Purnamashi

Of all the six seasons that make up the Indian year, spring and autumn stand out conspicuously as the chief festive seasons of the Hindus. And the explanation of this is not far to seek; spring and autumn are the two harvest seasons in India, and the population of the country having ever been mainly agricultural, it is natural that the harvest seasons should also be the festive seasons of the people. Changes in form and fashion have taken place in the festivals from age to age; festivals have in some cases lost their original significance and acquired fresh ones in the course of their immemorial history; new festivals have occasionally been added on to the calendar; but the *dates* of the ceremonies have in all cases remained unchanged through these hundreds and thousands of years. This is doubtless due to the fact that the ancestral occupations of the people, their characteristic modes of thought and feeling, and the essentially religious bend of their minds are to this day just what they were when these festivals

were first instituted in the misty past. For such a people the harvest season is the only time when it is possible for them to hold celebrations of any kind, public or private, religious or secular, that involve any outlay of money, as in bestowing gifts on Brahmans, or making offerings to the gods, or giving banquets to the village brotherhood. From the Ananta Chaturdashi starts a succession of festivals, of one kind or another, commencing with the fortnight dedicated to the worship of ancestors, followed immediately by the nine days of the Navaratra, and, five days later, by the vigil of the Lakshmi Puja, and a fortnight later again, by the illuminations of the Diwali, and terminating with the trio, Akshaya Navami, Devotthan Ekadashi, and Kartiki Purnamashi. A Hindu proverb says, "there are twelve months in the year, but thirteen festivals," and the saying will appear by no means exaggerated if we but look at the above list, and reckon the number of ceremonies it implies, all crammed within the short space of two lunar months. Kartiki Purnamashi brings up the rear of this glittering array of festivals, and then there is a halt in the march. For the next month, *Agrahayana*, is considered very inauspicious, at least in these provinces, because it was in this month that Rama's fourteen years' banishment took place. The whole month is consequently still

regarded as a period of mourning by the Hindus of the United Provinces, who loyally abstain from all kinds of domestic rejoicing in this unlucky month. Marriages are absolutely forbidden in this month, among all castes, for the belief is that a marriage held in this month is sure to prove unfortunate, for Rama's own marriage took place in *Agrahayana*, and no marriage ever proved more unhappy. For only a few days later, came the sentence of banishment upon Rama, followed not long afterwards by his wife's captivity, her second banishment to the hermitage of Valmiki, and her final disappearance from the scene of her woes.

Kartiki Purnamashi is one of those festivals which have now deviated from their original form and character. In the earliest ages, when the cult of Shiva was the prevalent form of faith, it was a festival held in honour of Shiva's victory over the demon Tripurasura. According to an old legend, there was once a war between the gods and the demons, who on being defeated appealed for help to Mai, a great magician, who gave them three towers of gold, silver, and iron, within which the demons concealed themselves, and from these safe coverts they carried on an irregular warfare against the celestials. The gods feeling powerless appealed for help to Shiva, 'the great god,' who personally came to their succour, and discharged such a

destructive shower of arrows upon the enemy's strongholds that there was not a foe left alive among the Asurs or demons. The cunning magician then gave them further aid by throwing their bodies into a well, which was situated within the triple line of fortifications, and lo! the demons sprang forth to life again and resumed their contest with the gods, for the well had been filled with nectar, and the mere contact of this miraculous fluid with the bodies of the slain demons was enough to restore them to life. To outwit the magician, Vishnu assumed the shape of a cow, and drained the nectared well completely dry. Shiva then attacked the demons again with formidable preparations—making the earth his war-chariot, with the sun and moon as chariot-wheels, and the Himalaya mountains as his bow, and with these he made an end of the 'Triple-towered demon' (Tripurasura). This victory, according to traditional belief, was won by Shiva on the day of the full moon of *Kartik*, and it is in allusion to this conquest of Tripurasura that Shiva is often represented in Hindu mythology as a warlike deity constantly engaged in battle with mighty demons. For the same reason Shiva is depicted as armed with a *Trisula*, or trident, having three prongs, symbolizing his three attributes of Creator, Destroyer and Regenerator. A bronze image in the Madras Museum represents Shiva in

the posture of dancing triumphantly on the body of the slain Tripurasura. For Shiva is also regarded as the 'lord of dancing' (hence his name of 'Natteshwara') — dancing by *male* dancers, who were at one time almost as numerous in India as Nautch girls.

The Kartiki Purnamashi has long ceased to be a Shaiva festival, and Shiva's victory over Tripurasura has become a forgotten legend, rarely known even to Hindu divines, except in so far as it accounts for one of Shiva's well-known names—Tripurari. As has happened to many another Hindu festival, the original facial stamp of Shaivism, which Kartiki Purnamashi bore in ancient times, was worn off in course of time, and a new impress put upon it by the Vaishnavas, who appropriated the festival to themselves as commemorating the day of Krishna's *Ras Lila*,—a festival celebrating the mystical amorous 'dance' of Krishna in the company of the 'pastoral maids' of Brindaban. Later on, during the ascendancy of Shaktism, the festival had a third stamp affixed to it, the Shaktas claiming it as a day sacred to the goddess of the Ganges, and declaring it as one of the most important bathing-days of the year.

The Ras Lila is a subject which has suffered much from the criticism of learned commentators who have been unable to perceive the allegory

running underneath. The description of this 'Lila' is given in the minutest detail in Chapters 29-33 of the *Srimad Bhagavata*, a religious treatise of the highest authority, written by the sage Vyasa, and recited by Sukadeva before king Parikshit, grandson of Raja Judhishtira of Hastinapur, who was one of the heroes of the *Mahabharata* war. The description is heavily overlaid with sensuous imagery of the most inflaming Oriental type, and it is probably natural that to the mind of an unsympathetic or hypercritical reader the pictures should suggest voluptuous thoughts, and the whole of the sacred narrative turned into a vivid sensual representation of what such a reader would be inclined to call the heedless dissipation of a reckless rake. But before passing any judgment on the ethical character of the Ras Lila, every reader should remember one simple fact, which is undeniable, that while at Brindaban, that is, at the date of the Ras Lila, Krishna was only a boy of twelve, and physically too immature to commit those excesses which have been charged against him by hasty critics. Even supposing he were older, the number of 'Gopikas' (or milkmaids) he is supposed to have dallied with—sixteen thousand!—is itself too appalling a figure to warrant a literal interpretation of these so-called amours. The simplest meaning of the Ras Lila is that it is a plain spiritual allegory, signifying the

happiness enjoyed by Krishna's followers in holding loving intercourse with their divine master. The sixteen thousand Gopikas represent the approximate number of his adherents at that date ; and as for the loving intercourse, it scarcely needs mention that the religion of Krishna is wholly and solely a religion of love, and, as everybody knows, love is a feeling the true essence of which cannot be defined except by pointing to concrete instances of the relation subsisting between master and servant, or father and son, or friend and friend, or husband and wife. And these are just the four types of Love subsisting between Krishna and his votaries—the last being the highest form of love. Again, the happiness of love, according to all philosophies, consists in its gratification, and the gratification consists in union with the beloved ; and how can the happiness of such a union be described or communicated in " matter-moulded forms of speech " except by borrowing illustrations from the physical world ? Every student of Psychology knows that in describing mental processes it is not only usual, but absolutely indispensable, to make use of words and expressions properly applicable to facts of the material world. When this is so in the case of such simple mental processes as apprehension, perception or attention, how much more so it must be in the case of the highest and most complex of human

feelings, namely, love, by virtue of which man rises nearer to divinity than by any other mental or bodily process. And when to these considerations we add others, due to the exigencies of language, and the impulses of poetry, and of Oriental poetry, we should have no further difficulty in understanding the true import of what was perhaps only a sacred ceremonial, but subsequently subjected to unmerited and rather irresponsible criticism at the hands of both eastern and western critics, and of deplorable misunderstanding at the hands of many Vaishnavas themselves.

The description of the Ras Lila, from the physical plane, has been well summarised by Coleman in his *Mythology of the Hindus* (pp. 42-43), from which the following is an extract, with the commentary omitted, and with a few immaterial verbal alterations :—

" On the night of the Kartik Purnima, when the moon was shining in her meridian lustre, and a cool and sweet air breathed around, Krishna began to play a ravishing note on his flute. On hearing it, the Gopikas immediately left their several occupations unfinished, and ran out to listen. Krishna asked them if all was well at home, and then proceeded to give them some good advice upon their duties to the family. One of the Gopikas replied, " When frenzy seizes the heart, all duties, all earthly

motives are overturned and forgotten. If you order us to go back, we are *lame* ; if you call us unto you, we *fly*." Krishna finding that their passion for him was sincere, took each of them in his arms and treated them with equal tenderness, so that all the happiness and transport which are to be found in the world were collected in one place —in the hearts of the Gopikas. Wherever they turned, each found Krishna close to her, and the happiness of their love for Krishna was enhanced by the feeling that Krishna loved them equally in return. All of a sudden—just as their love was tinged with this touch of vanity—Krishna played them a trick : he vanished from their company, leaving them staring around in astonishment and despair, and interrogating every tree, flower, and blade of grass, to obtain information of their runaway swain. After a tiresome search, they found that another damsel, named Radha, was engaging his attentions, and they became frantic with grief till Krishna, taking pity upon them, again made his appearance, when they worshipped him with flowers, and expressed their love to him in different actions and attitudes. All this exceesive joy terminated in a gay dance, in which Krishna multiplied his form in proportion to the number of the Gopikas, and giving each of them a hand, caused each to believe that he was close to her side. The exertion of the

dance caused the moisture of perspiration to appear on the cheeks of the Gopikas, whose jet-black tresses trembled over their shoulders as their hair lay in dishevelled curls behind their heads."

The above is a summarised translation of the five chapters of the *Bhagavata* treating of the Ras Lila. Even in this brief summary, the language is sensuous enough. But the spiritual significance of the whole, and of every detail of the narrative, is not very deep down, and does not require much effort to grasp. The beautiful full moon of an Indian autumn s selected by the poet as the time when Krishna plays a rapturous note on his flute, to represent the fact that scenes of natural beauty and calmness are the fittest places for the love-worship of Krishna, so much so that Krishna, as it were, *invites* his votaries thither, and the votaries (the 'Gopikas') respond to the invitation so eagerly that they forget everything of the world. The 'Gopikas,' in the allegory, stand for the votaries of Krishna, who may be of the male or female sex according to recognised earthly distinctions, but who, in their relation to Krishna, must be represented as all female, for, according to the ancient Hindu belief, the one male, the only *Purusha* in the universe, is Krishna, the Lord of Creation, to whom the infinitude of created worlds, especially his beloved followers, stand in the dearest of all human

relations, that of husband and wife, such a relationship being in Vaishnava phraseology called *Madhuriya*, which properly means ' the tender feelings of a passionate maiden for her love.'

The impassioned exclamation of the Gopika who replies to Krishna's advice by saying ' when frenzy seizes the heart, all duties, all earthly motives, are overturned and forgotten, '—will need no explanation if only the word ' frenzy ' is correctly interpreted to mean what it does—' religious fervour.'

The next sentence of Coleman, after this explanation, will come easier. It says, " Krishna finding that their passion for him was sincere, took each of them in his arms, &c." All that it means—and it *can* mean nothing else for a boy of twelve—for we should also remember that the number of Gopikas is put down at 16,000—all that it means is that Krishna after satisfying himself that the devotion of these 16,000 followers was genuine and sincere, accepted them for his followers. The phrase " took them in his arms " is only a graphic phrase meaning 'admitted them to fellowship.' In Hindi the common phrase used to denote an act of legally adopting a boy as heir, is ' taking into one's arms'—"*gôd lena*."

" Wherever they turned, each found Krishna close to her, etc." How can each member of a huge assembly of 16,000 find one and the same individual near to herself? That is a physical

impossibility, even though that one individual were to borrow "the heels of Atalanta." But interpreted in the light of love, the difficulty quickly vanishes. A person is naturally apt to see as distinct an image of his beloved in every object he looks upon, as, for instance, Tennyson saw of his deceased friend Hallam when he said —

> "Thy voice is on the rolling air,
> I hear thee where the waters run;
> Thou standest in the rising sun,
> And in the setting thou art fair.

As to Krishna's "trick" of slipping away mysteriously from the company, the explanation is that true love must be disinterested, devoid of self or vanity, so that as soon as a tinge of these baser elements discolours its white purity, 'Krishna vanishes,' *i.e.*, the *divine* element in the love instantly disappears. But if sorrow and penitence chasten it back again into an unalloyed passion, Krishna is successfully found again, as he is represented to have been by the grieving Gopikas. But, says the narrative, Krishna was discovered to have been "enjoying the company of another damsel, Radha." But what does Radha stand for in the allegory? She represents a votary of Krishna so devoted as to have become part and parcel of his very being, one without whom he could not rest at ease; and naturally therefore he should prefer such a one to the Gopikas, who, in the picture,

are only her handmaids. But still they represent the highest form of devotional love, cultivated at the sacrifice of earthly good, and they are therefore in their turn preferred over other devotees who seek to attain Krishna by other paths, such as those of abstract contemplation or reverence and awe.

Lastly, the 'dance' in which Krishna is said to have multiplied his form, giving a hand to each of the 16,000 Gopikas, is obviously not an earthly dance of the same type as an Indian *nautch*: it is only a physical metaphor intended to illustrate the boundless rapture felt by a truly devoted soul in a state of ecstatic union with its god. Those who have ever witnessed such a rare soul in such rare circumstances, will have no difficulty in understanding the meaning of the 'dance,' and the correct significance of the last sentence of the passage quoted from Coleman—that about the moisture of perspiration coming on the cheeks of the Gopikas, and their dishevelled hair—for they will remember that ecstasies, caused either by bodily transports or spiritual raptures, always leave a temporary after-effect of nervous exhaustion.

The above is the plain meaning of Ras Lila as understood by an ordinary educated Hindu, be he a Vaishnava or not. It is possible for a Hindu to dismiss all adverse criticism of Krishna's so-called

gallantries, by replying simply that Krishna is God, the Supreme Being Himself, and that canons of morality which selfish man has invented to safeguard his poor worldly interests, are clearly not applicable to the case of God, who is above all law, above all morality, and not subject to any kind of judgment. But such a 'defence' is hardly necessary in the case: that the whole is an allegory is enough to silence all criticisms of Krishna's so-called 'conduct' in the Ras Lila, which Hindus themselves regard as more or less mystical.

The Ras Lila is annually celebrated in some Hindu households in the form of an ordinary *nautch* party, in which little boys are decked as Gopikas, and one of them assumes the rôle of Krishna, and there is music and dancing of a rude or refined style, according to the taste of the actors and the householder. This is followed or preceded by the worship of Krishna, much in the same style as on the day of Janamashtami. It is noteworthy that in a Ras Lila performance it is customary to erect a sort of canopy or awning over the spot where the 'dance' takes place, even though this may be inside a roofed hall, the canopy being meant to signify that the gods above are not allowed even to witness the performance, much less to take part in it; for the Vaishnava belief is that no one is permitted to join in the Lila who does not stand "in the

relation of a Gopika" to Krishna,—that is, who is not an ardent, disinterested worshipper of him, who does not love him for his own sake, in utter obliviousness of his own self. The Ras Lila is celebrated as a 'festival' only by ignorant Hindus, who do not know that it does not mean a dance in any sense of the word. The educated classes celebrate it by worshipping the image or spirit of Krishna on this hallowed night when he loved to play a thrilling note on his pipe in the moonlit bowers of Brindaban.

Kartiki Purnamashi is also a great bathing-day. At every place situated on the banks of the Ganges there is a *mela* on this day; but the chief centre of bathing is Bithur, a village in the district of Cawnpore, which is regarded as one of the holiest spots in all Hindustan, having been the residence of Valmiki and the scene of the fight between Rama and his unknown sons, Lava and Kusa. In an earlier age it was the spot where Brahma, the Creator, completed the work of creation by holding an *Aswamedha* or horse-sacrifice, and the mark of a horse's hoof on one of the stone steps leading to what is called the Brahmavarta Ghat, is still shown to the pious pilgrim as an object of devout worship. The residence of Valmiki too is still shown on the river bank, and a temple was built in his honour by the Mahrattas on a mound to the

south of the town. The annual gathering of pilgrims at Bithur on this day is nearly one lac, and of this number a large proportion consists of *Sadhus* or religious mendicants.

THE END

